

VOICES OF MAYAN WOMEN IN PLAZA COMUNITARIA: POÉTICA Y EDUCACIÓN
DESDE YUCATÁN

By

Abraham Ceballos Zapata

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ABSTRACT

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This study took place in a village in Yucatan, Mexico in the context of two adult education programs in Yucatan [Plaza Comunitaria and Preparatoria Abierta]. I interacted in *convivencia* with bilingual (Mayan-Spanish) Yucatec Mayan women who took on the challenge of completing their formal schooling through those adult education programs. Over 3 summers (2013, 2014, 2015) I immersed myself in the community and witnessed their educational efforts. Ethnographic and *convivencia* methodologies (Galvan, 2015) helped generate data. I analyzed data with methodologies stemming from the humanities, in narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2004) and poetic analysis (Görlich, 2016; Prendergast, Leggo, & Sameshima, 2009). Through my discussion, I explore how the efforts of Yucatec Mayan women prompt educators imagine possibilities for decolonial education and inform our pedagogical practices across multiple educational settings. By focusing on the voices of rural women as poetry, I evoke the rhythms and memories of their lives in indigenous communities and in educational settings. This emerging research has taught me life and professional lessons of education on the margins. I witnessed their ethos of *familia*, and *solidaridad* as they studied together. Most importantly, they showed me how studying and being in community are inseparable.

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CHAPTER ONE

The Context of the Study

“Para comprender algo humano, personal o colectivo, es preciso contar una historia.”

Ortega y Gasset

“La Historia como Sistema (p. 91).”

Introduction

Plaza Comunitaria is a community education program for adults. Formally, it is run by the federal Mexican government. The program aims at attending the needs of vulnerable youth and adults (Bernhardt, Yorozu, & Medel-Añonuevo, 2014). My research took place in a small Yucatán village, "Agua Clara," that had been participating in the Plaza Comunitaria. The adult students who participated, mostly women, had been pursuing an elementary and/or middle school diploma through Plaza Comunitaria in Agua Clara. I visited them three times, in the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015 to conduct research on their local approach to education.

I began getting immersed in Agua Clara and in its Plaza Comunitaria in the summer of 2013. At first, I tagged along with Alicia, the local coordinator of Plaza Comunitaria. Over the summers of 2013, 2014, and 2015, Alicia invited me to witness the efforts students at Agua Clara were making to complete their K-12 schooling. Eventually, I met more people, and I got to ask more questions. When I was not there, I remained in touch with them via social media. To this date, their posts on social media afford me a good excuse to smile. During those summers, I maintained a discipline of writing field notes of my observations, experiences, memories, reflections, puzzling and surprising events. As experienced ethnographers would expect, the plot lines running across those field notes thickened.

I interviewed students of Plaza Comunitaria, inquiring about what being part of *La Plaza* meant to them. I transcribed some those interviews myself, and commissioned the transcriptions of others. Right before every fall of those years, I returned to Michigan State University to make sense of those memories by writing them up as academic papers, or as scholars informally call this practice to “unpack them.” In the village, I also engaged in multiple informal interviews and conversations. I put these two together because, at some point, the lines between the two blurred; and as those events become more distant it is harder to tell them apart. I now access those memories by reading the field notes and memos I wrote of those events.

Over a period of three summers, I could see change in my own research approach. In that research journey, there were several gradual shifts. I went from using data collection as a formal technique to generating data through *convivencia* and seeing it through *vox participare*, a change that both reflected and prompted my evolving theoretical stance. I started my visits looking for very specific answers, and moved to learning how to be open to the ways people of La Plaza would work together. New questions emerged that broadened my original ones. I have tried to reflect the shifts in research approaches in the following stories about Plaza Comunitaria in Agua Clara. I went from looking at redefining educated identities to seeking to engage with the identities that were already there. I am intentionally framing the notion of gaining rapport as attentive listening, and participant observation as witnessing.

I use a methodology of *con-vivencia* (communal lived experiences) to investigate how adult students’ voices give us ways to imagine a decolonial education, and inform our pedagogical practices across multiple educational settings. *Convivencia* is at the center of my world as a researcher. I define *convivencia* as communal lived experience performed day to day. It is a research methodology because by acting in *convivencia* with the friends I met in

the village, I came to encounter the deep intellectual and ethical resources women of Plaza Comunitaria brought into their life projects. *Convivencia* permeates their lives as an attitude they bring into their studies. In short, through the lens of *convivencia* we can see how for women of Plaza Comunitaria to study and to be in community are inseparable.

In the process, I also learned how to connect *convivencia* with Ortega y Gasset's philosophy of *raciovitalismo*. His philosophical project provided the theoretical underpinnings that run along my analysis. There are several strands in his philosophy that sustain this project theoretically: first is his critique of rationalism, such critique inspired me to interpret research as a vital experience. I interpret my own vital experience as a researcher through my ethical commitments. Second, his philosophy of *raciovitalismo* inverts cartesianism by subsuming reason to life. He argued that life is the foundation for intellectual life. This attitude resonates with my observations. Third, he proposed that understanding human matters requires storytelling. This helped me weave in the narrative elements as part of the analysis. Finally, his philosophical project allowed me to find connections between philosophy of education and ethnographic research in line with other researchers (Hansen, Wozniak and Galindo Diego, 2014).

Emotional elements emerged in the research process. I cautiously sought to avoid bias stereotyping women as being over-emotional in the workplace, while at the same time not pruning important elements of their experience. Through the lens of *vox participare* (Pendergast, Lego and Sameshima, 2009) I could pay attention to those emotional elements in the work and efforts of women of Plaza Comunitaria. *Vox participare* refers to the strand of research within poetic inquiry that pays attention to the voices of participants by looking at data through poetic lenses. This line of inquiry allowed me to create a rupture from the disciplinary impositions on research methodologies. Researchers utilize *vox participare* to pay attention to emotional elements that otherwise might be overlooked.

Figure 1 below, "Theorizing the voices of Mayan women," presents at a glance the theoretical components of my research. On one end, the thought of Ortega y Gasset permeates all the elements of this research project. The ethnographic aspect of my research stems out of the theoretical framework and ethical commitments. On the other end, I present the notion of *convivencia* as methodology and *vox participare* as lens.

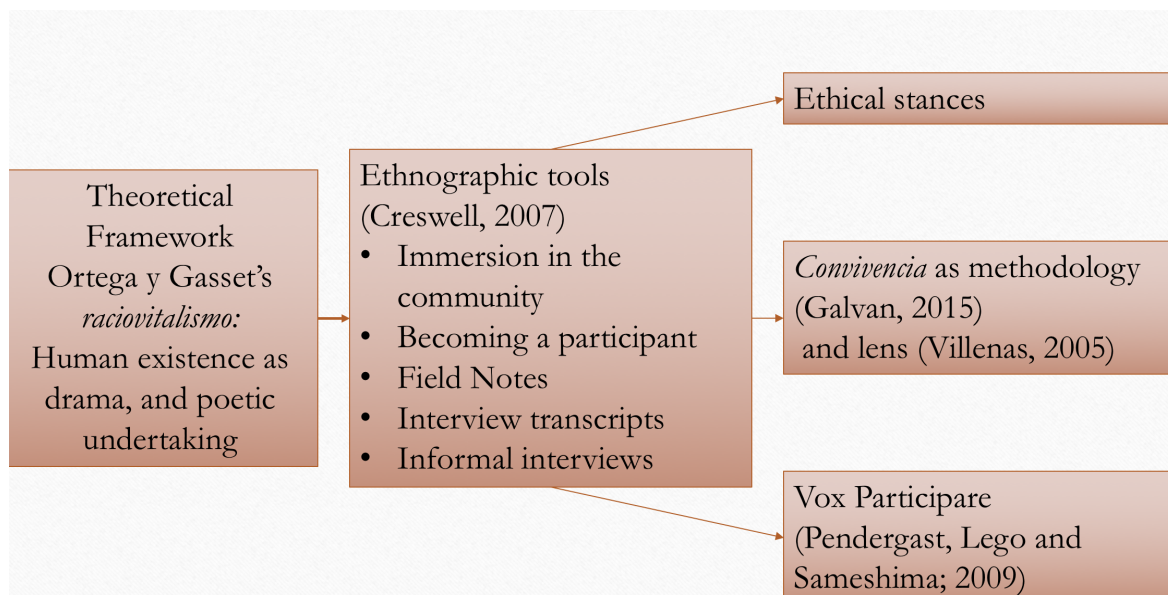


Figure 1. Theorizing the voices of Mayan women

I met Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero when I arrived at Agua Clara in the summer of 2013. I learned that Alicia and Tomasita had completed the Plaza Comunitaria program. Since they had their *secundaria* [middle school] diploma, along with Vero they had been studying together to complete their high school diploma. The analysis appears in their respective chapters in the context of both Plaza Comunitaria and Preparatoria Abierta. I refer to the study group in the context of their program to Preparatoria Abierta.

Against all odds, they completed their K-12 schooling through adult education programs. When I met them, I realized that they were so close to finishing the high school program. I was intrigued about what had sustained their journey in such circumstances? I

eventually asked: How do Tomasita, Vero and Alicia--all Mayan women--experience their return to school? And through my analysis I asked: How can those experiences challenge me as an educator? I present through each chapter the stories that reveal their intellectual and ethical resources as well as their stories of education at the margins. My hope is to present a more human vision of what is indigenous, not as an object of study, but as *convivencia*. In this study, I want to present the vitality I experienced through the multiple narratives and poems I composed with their words. With this work, I also hope to expand the imagination of readers regarding the Mayan beyond jungles and temples.

Alicia opened the doors of Plaza Comunitaria for me, both literally and figuratively. By way of her welcoming, I came to intermingle with people of *La Plaza*, as she would endearingly refer to it. I witnessed the pedagogical spaces created by the students and her, in Plaza Comunitaria and beyond. At the time, Alicia was a 31-year-old woman serving as the coordinator of *La Plaza*, who on a daily basis walked the four corners of Agua Clara as if they had no end. She spoke with deep conviction about *La Plaza* as a site for redemption, where villagers would vindicate missed life opportunities. For those missed opportunities, she assured them they had found the perfect place.

Plaza Comunitaria Context

Adult Education in México and Plaza Comunitaria

The National Institute for Adult Education (INEA) in México attempts to tackle youth and adult illiteracy across the country through adult education programs for marginalized populations. One of those programs is known as Plaza Comunitaria (PC). For some time, Plazas Comunitarias have been the “face” of adult education programs in México. On the one hand, PC’s curriculum has earned recognition as innovative and promising (Schmelkes, 2012). On the other hand, scholars point out that its implementation has been impacted by administrative failures, lack of appropriate funding (Ávila, 2013), and for not successfully motivating and recruiting students (Álvarez Mendiola, 2006).

The National Institute for Adult Education is a decentralized organization that was created in 1981. In that year, then Mexican President José Lopez Portillo issued an order to create the National Institute for Adult Education (INEA). Then, Minister of Education Fernando Solana, delineated the principles and goals of the new institute. United Nations and UNESCO were involved in the design of INEA. The Mexican government commissioned a team to coordinate the creation of such institute. The team members traveled to Tanzania and Senegal to learn about adult education programs of those countries. INEA took on the task of putting into action the National Law of Adult Education. Through this institution, the Mexican government, would provide free educational services to adults (defining adults as any person 15 years old and older) along with a certification system that would allow students to have an official diploma (Castro-Muñoz, 2011).

The philosophy of INEA is expressed in the Modelo Educación para la Vida y el Trabajo (MEVyT, Education for Life and Work Model). MEVyT connects the life experiences of adult learners with the curriculum. Flexibility is at the center of the model. Students can take as much time needed to complete any module, they can abide by the

anticipated cycle (4 weeks per module), or move faster. MEVyT follows as a guiding principle the idea inclusion of life experiences of adults in the curriculum. Adult students under this model can go through three different levels or grades: literacy, primary and secondary. In the Mexican context secondary goes up to 9th grade. (CONEVyT, 2013). The training manual *Para Saber Más del MEVyT* (2006. p. 37) explains:

MEVyT conceptualizes the education of youth and adults as a process of recognizing, strengthening, and building learning and knowledge to develop competencies.

Through those competencies youth and adults will be able to explain the causes and effects of diverse phenomena, solve problems in their different contexts and life situations. In this conceptualization centered on the people, content areas refer to real needs and interests. By doing this, youth and adult will apply what they learn with the goal of improving their individual, familial and social (my translation).

Application of knowledge is ingrained in training materials and the structure of Plaza Comunitaria. This framing of pedagogical goals follow a logic of human capital theory (Bartlett, 2007, Aikman, 2012). In the statement above MEVyT connects individual, familial and social development to students competencies developed through the program. MEVyT also emphasizes connections to life. This view is evident in in another training manual (Pérez Gómez, 2006. P. 19) for *asesores* :

What is learning? Learning is the process of in which people reflect and build new knowledge based on their experiences or previous knowledge, being able to act on reality transforming it and transforming themselves. Therefore, to learn is appropriate new information, give it new meaning, and apply it to daily life (my translation).

INEA defines its goals broadly. It aims at developing educational models, conducting research, creating and distributing educational materials, assessing adult learning, and certifying and accrediting adult students. INEA offers a valid accreditation nationally across

educational institutions (INEA, 2013). This institution provides basic education to students ages 15 and older, who have not completed their basic educational milestones, through a non-formal educational system delivered at Plazas Comunitarias (PCs).

A community (whether located in a village or neighborhood) can start a study group with the support of INEA. When a community can gather a group of students interested in finishing basic education, INEA steps in to support the creation of a Punto de Encuentro. This is the first organizational step that functions as a study group sponsored by INEA. When there is widespread interest in the community for these programs, and the need is evident (i.e., high dropout rates) in the community, INEA allocates funds so a particular community can operate an adult education program called Plaza Comunitaria. Community members and INEA staff work with local authorities to find facilities in the town where PCs will operate. Whether it is a Punto de Encuentro or a Plaza Comunitaria, INEA will send instructors (who receive a very small compensation) to guide students through INEA study materials. All materials are provided for free.

Plaza Comunitaria: Goals, Services and Roles

In this section, I explain the goals of Plaza Comunitaria as a program, services and the different roles of people who participated in Plaza Comunitaria. This will serve to describe the operational aspects of Plaza Comunitaria as established by the National Institute for the Education of Adults.

PC course offerings can be classified in three different categories. First, basic literacy, students learn how to read and write, basic arithmetic (in Plaza Comunitaria this is known as the ALFA program). Second, PC provides education corresponding to elementary education. Third, PC offers programs so that adults can obtain their junior high school certificate (*secundaria*). Instructional materials are designed to make connections with real-life situations. Adults can also take those courses without necessarily completing the programs.

They can enroll in those as separate courses and job training. PC is designed to be very flexible. It accommodates varied schedules within students and tutors. It does not have deadlines for students, and students can make decisions regarding which modules they want study. PCs offer several services such as basic education, life and job skills training, community services, and a literacy program (ALFA).

The program PC has two broad functions, that is, education and outreach. The first goal within the function of education is providing basic education. PC's offer basic education to youth and adult (people 15 and older who have not completed basic education) so that they can obtain an elementary and/or middle school certificate. Community members can study online modules or printed materials accessible through Plazas Comunitarias. In both cases PC has desktop computers and tutors available to guide students through the content and help them prepare for the test.

The second goal within the function of education is serving as a school community. Broadly speaking, PCs are conceived by INEA as sites for education within the community. To achieve this goal, PC's combine the use of technology, training, and knowledge with the support of local and regional staff members. Along those lines, PC's provide training in life and job skills. This is available to people without necessarily pursuing a basic education certificate. Community members can study a course or module of their interest. Plaza Comunitaria offers many modules and courses geared towards learning about life and job skills. Tutors are also available to students who desire to study specific modules.

The second broad function is outreach. PCs physical spaces can be used for other community purposes. It can be a gathering place. Community members or interest groups can host reunions there to plan, discuss and tackle problems. Materials, books, and computers connected to the Internet are available to these groups. INEA also encourages other types of community partnerships. The specific village I visited has partnered with a non-profit

organization called ProJoven (Pro-Youth) to encourage women who dropped out school (due to financial, family issues or pregnancy) to continue their studies. They have also worked with program called “Un Kilo de Ayuda” [A Kilogram of Help] which provides groceries to people in need. Another program they work with is called “El Buen Juez” [The Good Judge]. This is a program sponsored by INEA with the goals of providing basic education to people working at any level of government (federal, state or local) who have not finished their schooling.

PCs involve in their system local volunteers, regional and state representatives. One group of people is called *figuras solidarias* (local volunteers). They are locals who are willing to volunteer in Plazas Comunitarias. The second group of people falls within the classification of *figuras institucionales* (INEA employees). *Figuras solidarias* are not hired as staff members, but receive some monetary compensation. Tutors (one instance of *figura solidaria*) receive about 7 dollars for every exam that any of their students has passed. There is also compensation for tutors as their students complete modules and certificates for a particular level (i.e. literacy program, elementary, junior high school). The local coordinator in Agua Clara received about \$2000 pesos a month (less than \$200 dollars) for her work. The local coordinator and tutor sign a document recognizing that they are not hired as INEA employees.

In the table below, I organize the classification of the different denominations of PC participants:

Figuras solidarias	Figuras institucionales
<p><i>Promotor comunitario</i> [local coordinator] Local coordinator who is often a community member in charge of administration and recruitment of the site. They are referred on-site as: el promotor or la promotora.</p> <p><i>Asesores</i> [tutors] They offer tutoring students and help students prepare for the tests. They can tutor in groups or in a one-on-one basis. In the case of the village I observed, all tutors were locally recruited, and supported the on-the-ground work of Plaza Comunitaria.</p> <p><i>Apoyo técnico</i> [technical support] Administers the computer lab. He/she also helps students who want to study online modules. The person in the role of apoyo técnico assists local coordinator (promotor/a) updating the enrollment and students' progress figures in the database.</p> <p><i>Aplicadores</i> [proctors] Proctors who visit Plaza Comunitarias with printed exams. After the exams are taken they return them to the state offices.</p>	<p><i>Técnico docente</i> [teaching specialist] Visits different Plazas Comunitarias in order to provide support, training, collect data about the enrollment and students' completion, and bringing the money to pay tutors and local coordinator.</p> <p><i>Coordinadores de zona</i> [regional coordinators] INEA staff who supervise performance of Plazas Comunitarias, allocate funding, and help promoting the work of Plazas in the community.</p> <p><i>Personal de la coordinación de zona</i> [staff working with regional coordinators] Administration at the regional level</p> <p><i>Personal de las oficinas, institutos y delegaciones</i> [states offices staff] Administration at the state level</p>

Table 1. Plaza Comunitaria service providers

As shown in the table above, Plazas Comunitaria labor is divided between two groups of figuras. In the case of *figuras solidarias* they are mainly from the village (with the exception of proctors). Many of the tutors for instance have been students who decide to join these efforts, or students from the community with a *secundaria* (middle school) or *bachillerato* (high school) diploma. The second group is *figuras institucionales*. They are INEA employees at the regional or state level who coordinate the work in the local Plazas Comunitarias.

Plazas Comunitarias in the United States

INEA also implements Plaza Comunitaria programs in the U.S. providing elementary and secondary education to Mexicans living in the U.S. However, Plazas Comunitarias offer their services to anyone, and in particular Spanish speakers. INEA coordinates with different consulates and various local organizations to create implement the Plaza Comunitaria program. INEA has also created manuals and program implementation guides in English, some aspects of the curriculum have been adapted to respond to the U.S. context (<http://www.conevyt.org.mx>). Some of the materials specifically address the issues immigrants face. The state of Michigan has three Plazas Comunitarias located in Detroit, and one Plaza Comunitaria in Grand Rapids that operates in collaboration with Grand Valley State University (<https://www.gvsu.edu/las/plaza-comunitaria-60.htm>).

The Site: Agua Clara

Agua Clara strikes any visitor as regular Yucatán village. In the morning, Agua Clara villagers rush to catch their taxis and buses for their work or school commute. Others who work in the village open up their businesses. The rest of the day seems quiet. Some retired men sit down at the Plaza quietly while they chat with other friends. Many women stay and work on their *quehaceres* (daily chores). It is here where I encountered stories of learning.

The municipality of Agua Clara is located in the Southern area of the state of Yucatán. It has a little over 4,800 inhabitants. Its inhabitants worked the henequen plant during the heyday of its production. Nowadays the municipality produces corn, beans and other types of vegetables. They also farm pigs and cattle, and they practice aviculture. The municipality has also various archeological sites, as well as sinkholes (*cenotes*) around. In the nearby villages sinkholes are starting to get tourists' attention.

Agua Clara has a reputation in the state of Yucatán for handbags and backpacks manufacturing. Several families have workshops with sewing machines in their houses. They

pass those skills to their children. Those who choose to work on this occupation sell their production to retail stores in the capital of the state of Yucatán. Many visitors come to the village with the intention of purchasing handbags at low prices. I noticed in my last visit that some local small business had just started selling their own products. Youth also work in the construction business; they usually commute to Mérida or Cancun to work in construction. There are some people in the village who have migrated to the United States. Migrants use their remittances to build their houses. There is a stark contrast between the houses built by migrants and those who stayed in the village.

Agua Clara Plaza Comunitaria Local Coordinator: Alicia

I worked closely with the local program coordinator. Alicia helped me access the daily life in a Plaza Comunitaria. Alicia is a 31-year-old Mayan woman who serves as the coordinator of Plaza Comunitaria in Agua Clara. She is the second person serving in such a position since the program started. I will refer to her as Alicia for research confidentiality reasons.

Alicia served in her position as coordinator from December 2012 to March of 2015. She first became involved as a student earning her *secundaria* (middle school) diploma through this program. Alicia's interest in participation increased upon earning her *secundaria* diploma. She then joined PC as an *asesor* (tutor). Finally, she was selected by the *técnico docente* (regional coordinator) to be the PC local coordinator (*promotora*) in her community.

My initial contact with Alicia was the starting point of my inquiry. I became acquainted with the day-to-day struggles she faced to keep the program running. She made me aware of tensions between the stated program goals and the program goals that people running the program on site had for themselves. I also learned how local tutors enacted pedagogies that stemmed out of their desire to learn and to teach others.

Alicia promotes the services offered by *La Plaza*, whether through house visits or

formal presentations in the community. She networks with other local organizations coordinating services across different organizations for students of Plaza Comunitaria. She introduced me to many *asesores* (local tutors). Later, I would learn through my interviews that they were involved out of their sheer desire to share their experiences learning.

Agua Clara Plaza Comunitaria Site: La Plaza

Yucatán is known for its plain terrains. However, the building housing Plaza Comunitaria sits at an elevation next to the Town Hall. Plaza Comunitaria has a prime location in town. The Catholic Church white building rises across from Plaza Comunitaria. The first time I visited Plaza Comunitaria it was a rectangular old building, painted in color beige. In the front of the building you can read in big black letters “Plaza Comunitaria de Agua Clara, Gobierno del Estado de Yucatán.” When you walk to the building up on a very rocky path, the smaller letters telling the service hours appear more clearly.

Inside Plaza Comunitaria some of the walls have started shedding some of their paint. The material that covers the walls has started breaking up. This causes some of the wall materials to go into the room, and fall on the floors. The color beige on the walls and the age of the building help bring up a calcareous look. Each room is labeled with the name of the functions it is supposed to serve. In the different rooms, visitors can read written in black cursive letters: computer room, multipurpose room, and conference room. Names that follow the guidelines for Plazas Comunitarias. The rooms are somewhat adapted in different ways. Its rooms also feature posters that encourage people to study. Some other posters are more detailed and talk about interesting topics. The latter are made by a communications department from the National University of México. The former are made by the local staff at Plaza Comunitaria. Posters are made of different materials and they all convey the sense of the importance of going back to school.

There are office supplies in every room. There is a front desk that Alicia uses for

archiving files and conducting day-to-day businesses. There is a cabinet in each room to store different resources and supplies. These supplies give Plaza Comunitaria a school-like presentation. The computer room sticks out among the other rooms for being a renovated room with tiles on the floor. The fans running at full force on the ceiling refresh that room more than at any other space. Computers are laid out around the room next to the walls. In that building, I cannot help but think in the juxtaposition of old and new things, formal and casual, elements that belong to the national program of Plaza Comunitaria and those things that come from the locals, and also different goals.

Agua Clara Plaza Comunitaria Study Group

When I met Tomasita, Vero, and Alicia they had already been studying together for some time. They had started studying through the Preparatoria Abierta program with a larger group of adult students from Agua Clara. Eventually many students dropped. Alicia had a core group of 6 people studying. Tomasita, Vero and Alicia were the most consistent, and I ended up observing many of their gatherings. When I refer to the study group is in the context of Preparatoria Abierta. According to the Preparatoria Abierta site :

Preparatoria Abierta is a public educational service of the Ministry of Education and the state governments offered. Preparatoria Abierta is a non-escholarized modality of education offered at the high school level. It is offered to the population with the desire or need to start, continue and conclude this level of education who are not able to line up with a regular school schedule. (<http://www.prepaabierta.sep.gob.mx>)

The flexibility of the schedule also meant there was no building or regular teachers assigned. Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero made the arrangements (when the program did not send a teacher) to find teacher who would help with the different subjects The teachers they found could register in the Preparatoria Abierta system and receive a small compensation. Given the distance of the village from any major towns or cities it was difficult to find teachers.

Tomasita, Vero and Alicia's teachers seemed to work with them out of desire to help more than for the compensation. Since there was no official building for Preparatoria Abierta in Agua Clara they met in various places. The first two summers (2013, 2014) I conducted research Alicia was leading the Plaza Comunitaria program. Their Preparatoria Abierta study group met in the Plaza Comunitaria building after Alicia had finished her work. Other times, they met at the elementary school near the Plaza, and other times in the *secundaria* building.

[The program] consists of 22 modules. Each module is a unit of learning within the curricular plan. This plan includes contents from different areas of knowledge, teaching and learning strategies, informative and formative activities with the goal of helping students develop multiple competencies. The non-formal modality of Preparatoria Abierta represents the main instrument of the federal government to tackle the dropout rates at a high school level. For those reasons the program has evolved socially and technologically, and changed its curricular plan to 33 subjects. (<http://www.prepaabierta.sep.gob.mx>)

Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero described experiences traveling to Mérida to take exams, failing, and having to retake them. When Vero talks about cheering on her peers or lending them downloaded study materials, it is oftentimes in the context of their efforts to complete the Preparatoria Abierta program. The program keeps track of the exams through an online system. Preparatoria Abierta program emphasizes the independence of study skills as well as the opportunity to retake exams if students are not satisfied with their grades. As of April of 2017, Vero and Tomasita have completed their high school through this program.

CHAPTER TWO

“La vida es un gerundio y no un participio: un faciendum y no un factum, la vida es quehacer.”

Ortega y Gasset

“La Historia como Sistema (p. 85)”

A Vitalist Ethnography of Education

My research in Plaza Comunitaria merges two broad theoretical areas recursively. On the one hand, I collected ethnographic data over three summers in the Plaza Comunitaria of Agua Clara. On the other hand, the ethnographic data prompted philosophical explorations. Because they seem to be distinct inquiry traditions, one of my challenges was bridging a philosophy of education and an anthropology of education. My efforts focused on utilizing life as a theoretical framework to guide the ethnographic aspect of the study. In bringing life as theoretical framework I asked: what are some theoretical underpinnings that can support ethnography from that perspective? In this section I will explain how the thought of Ortega y Gasset made that interaction possible. I will explore how his ideas became very generative for developing a bridge between philosophy and anthropology of education.

In Agua Clara, I encountered a group of women poised to continue their education. It intrigued me. I decided to follow this experience over three summers. By following Plaza Comunitaria women's efforts I blended narrative and ethnographic methodologies. Theoretically, I sought grounding in the ideas of Ortega y Gasset. His notion of historical reason provides epistemological foundations for understanding life through the lenses of a narrative logic. This narrative logic connects to some of the discursive elements of ethnographic work that already part of the ethnographic tradition of inquiry. Creswell (2007)

recognizes that ethnographic research benefits from rhetorical devices as well literary tropes such as metaphors, synecdoche, storytelling tropes, and even irony where the researcher contrasts competing frames of reference.

Life as a Theoretical Framework

There are several threads in Ortega y Gasset's philosophy I used as theoretical underpinnings of my research in Plaza Comunitaria, thus connecting his philosophical thought to an anthropology of education. First, I build on Ortega y Gasset's critique of the dehumanizing impact of rationalism on the social sciences. His notion of life as biography and not biology already suggests an alternative approach in studying human matters. He would argue that to understand the nature of an individual we would have to understand his/her history. Second, Ortega y Gasset anticipated that attitudes towards rationalism can fall on two extremes. The first extreme is that advocacy for rationalism may lead to overlooking lived experiences. To respond to this extreme, he argued that reason was a function of life. Reason needs to be subsumed to life, not vice versa. On the other hand, if we overcome that extreme by moving to the other side and affirming lived experience only, it would be possible to fall on some form of irrationalism. Ortega y Gasset sought to avoid those two extremes. His notion of *la razón vital* responds to that dilemma by integrating reason and life as one vital experience. Third, Ortega y Gasset sought to understand human matters, whether as individual or collective, through a narrative logic. In that effort, he drew from his critical literary work, and often reflected on life as a novel. Fourth, his interest in human endeavors as a fundamentally vital effort incorporates language of the mundane into his thinking. In this study, I build on the notions of *quehacer* and *faena* framed under his discussion of *vivencias* and *circunstancias*. The four themes that I will discuss are the following: (1) objections to rationalism, (2) *la razón vital*, (3) *la razón histórica*, and (4) cartesianism of life.

Objections to rationalism

Ortega y Gasset questioned rationalism as a paradigm for the social sciences and humanities. In the following section, I explain what are some of the assumptions of rationalism that Ortega y Gasset opposed with his philosophy. I also draw connections between his philosophical arguments and Plaza Comunitaria. By making these assumptions explicit I can justify the orientations towards the experience beyond the policy that originated the program, the focus of my analysis and methodological decisions.

First, he deemed rationalism insufficient as a philosophical project. He was skeptical that people armed with pure reason can conquer the abyss of the cosmos, and yet find realization through this exercise of the reason. For Ortega y Gasset rationalism is a form of idealism because ideas have primacy for directing life, thus giving humans certainty that realization can be achieved through pure reason. Ortega y Gasset positioned his philosophy to grasp knowledge beyond our intellectual faculties. Ortega y Gasset proposes there are appreciative faculties with which we can “see” values. He argues that there are geniuses of the appreciative faculties as well as geniuses of the intellectual faculties. An ethical life connects both sets of faculties.

This is important for my study because as a researcher I can expand my understanding of the efforts of the women of Plaza Comunitaria beyond what is purely rational. Rather than seeing them as forging an intellectual life only, or learning within a developmentalist framework in which women of Plaza Comunitaria receive the benefits of aid and development programs. It allows me to see their efforts as both intellectual and vital. It is a theoretical principle that encourages me to include their life perspectives. Women of Plaza Comunitaria treat their study of the Plaza Comunitaria program in equal terms as the *familia* and *compañerismo* they developed overtime. In fact, by making their *familia* the starting point they model the reprioritization between reason and life that Ortega y Gasset envisioned.

Second, his ideas raised questions on the often-assumed correspondence between reality and thought. Ortega y Gasset does not subscribe to the idea that there is an exact correspondence between reality and thinking, nor does he think that we need to strive towards it. He suggests that when we look at our surroundings we are actively interpreting our world. This active process of seeing-interpreting the world brings our personal lives into what we see. He called this notion perspectivism. What we consider reality is constituted by multiple perspectives (explicit or not).

This attempt to make thoughts and realities merge influenced the earlier stages of my work. At first, in the process of analysis, I attempted to extract some form of idea from my observations. I wrote extensive notes about the motivations and how Plaza Comunitaria women were forging new identities. I did this with the hopes of extracting some ultimate theory. This, however, reflected a rationalist assumption in that I was still trying to “abstract” ideas out of what I perceived as a reality. Ortega y Gasset argues that rationalism in its purest form is not possible because ultimately, we cannot escape from our own perspective. By recognizing that there is always a perspective involved in our discourses, I could weave the perspectives that the women of Plaza Comunitaria throughout the research. Their perspectives became the starting point. Each of the narratives of Alicia, Tomasita and Vero that I present brings a unique perspective into how each person approaches Plaza Comunitaria and their study efforts.

Third, he critiqued the notion that reason is isolated from the mundane issues of life. Ortega y Gasset explains this active seeing-interpreting in *Meditaciones del Quijote*. Ortega y Gasset explains that the person of faith that sees God in the fields and nature it is no different from the person that describes an orange. He posits that in both cases that active seeing of the world is in both cases a product of the imagination and life. Ortega y Gasset explains his notion of *transmundos* in *Meditaciones del Quijote*:

Cuando dice el hombre de mucha fe que ve a Dios la campiña florecida y en la faz combada de la noche – no se expresa más metafóricamente que si hablara de haber visto una naranja. Si no hubiera más que un ver pasivo quedaría el mundo reducido a un caos de puntos luminosos. Pero hay sobre el pasivo ver un ver activo, que interpreta viendo y ve interpretando, un ver que es mirar. (p. 52)

Ortega y Gasset elaborates:

La dimensión de profundidad, sea espacial o de tiempo, sea visual o auditiva, se presenta siempre en una superficie. De suerte que esta superficie posee en rigor dos valores: el uno cuando lo tomamos como lo que es materialmente; el otro cuando la vemos en su segunda vida virtual. En el último caso la superficie, sin dejar de serlo, se dilata en un sentido profundo. Esto es lo que llamamos escorzo (p. 52).

In other words, abstract reflections and daily life descriptions lie on the same plane of the imagination. Both are ways of seeing-interpreting the world around us. This means two things for my research project. First, daily life activities are not just “objects of observation” but they are the means through inquiry. Their words, repeated sentences, imagery, speech become windows into their unique perspectives. These insights allowed me to bring lenses that integrate the daily life into inquiry. I will explain this further in the methodological chapter. Second, this means that my analyses as researcher whether pedagogical or philosophical are not in a superior plane. This is a necessary insight to bring in humbleness to the process of inquiry. Therefore, in my writing I attempted to weave my reflections with their words. I did this through poetic inquiry.

Fourth, he argued that the substance of life is movement. Ortega y Gasset reasoned that movement and change is the internal logic of life. Life is not substance that changes accidentally according to its interaction with the surroundings. Instead, the “substance” of life is change (Ortega y Gasset 2001, p.87). The subject of that life (that is happening) is not a

separate entity from life. He concludes that the logic of life is narrative, he coined the term historical reason to describe this idea. Because of this narrative logic past and present interact. “Life as reality is absolute presence (Ortega y Gasset 2001, p. 91).” Past manifests itself as present. Reflecting on human nature he argues that there is no ultimate nature to be grasped other than what it becomes clear through the past. Present is the past having an influence on us. Ortega y Gasset suggest this reasoning can be applied individually as well collectively. Identity is past. It is a history and not biology. Past is the “substance” of humans.

This notion connects with my research because it prevents me from imposing a cause-and-effect logic onto what was happening in Plaza Comunitaria and the study group. His idea that substance does not change incidentally evokes an image of a researcher studying objects in which the outcomes of certain interventions can be fully abstracted. Epistemologically is not possible to make essentializing statements about human matters since life does not follow that logic. It needs to be captured narratively. That does not mean that we should not attempt to capture meaning. Rather, it prompts the researcher to capture meaning through a narrative logic, recognizing that life is still moving. That is why narratives and the poems of Plaza Comunitaria attend to the past. Tomasita, Alicia, and Vero foreground some of their past experiences as interpretive lenses of their present. For instance, Alicia talks about her early experiences attempting to continue her education, and later become the leader of Plaza Comunitaria. Tomasita reflects on the profound effects of linguistic marginalization, and Vero reflects on how the story of the group explains their *familia* ethos.

Vital reason

“Life is rush” – posited Ortega y Gasset (2001, p. 75) in *Historia como sistema*. He defended that life cannot be studied as object, but as movement. Ortega y Gasset understands the tensions between rationalism and relativism as one of most important philosophical dilemmas. The former embraces logic and reason, while the latter emphasizes the mobility of

existence. Ortega y Gasset foresees the possibilities and shortcomings of both philosophical systems. He envisions a synthesis that is now known as *raciovitalismo*, or the system of thought that starts with the vital reason.

He positions *raciovitalismo* as a system capable of sorting out the consequences of subjectivism and realism. This helped me to think about my own assumptions of inquiry. I realized that my reflective practice, while important was not the ultimate goal of conducting research, as if I could represent perfectly my experience with my mental efforts. Also, prompted by his ideas, I realized that my interpretations carry my own perspective, and thus I cannot claim to be making an exact representation of Plaza Comunitaria, the students I met, or the village.

How did I research the experiences of rural women enrolled in adult education programs? The notion of vital reason creates tools to uncover life in the varied experiences that I had documented with women of Plaza Comunitaria at Agua Clara. From the beginning, it became evident that women of Plaza Comunitaria had taken on a life project that had consumed their lives. I started writing field notes highlighting certain aspects of life and education in the village. Themes such as excitement, commitment, passion, joy, tears and laughter started to populate the lines of my field notes bringing a lively dimension to the inquiry - rush and movement started to emerge.

In his thought, culture, knowledge and science need to serve life. He articulated notions to sustain a method of inquiry able to attend to such rush of life. The radical experience of life is the basis for his method of history, and the approach that I took in working with the people of Agua Clara. There are three notions that help in framing this research project: *mundo patente* [sensible world], *vivencia* [lived experience] and *creencia* [belief].

The first notion that I want to consider is the idea of *el mundo patente*. He wanted to

account for reality as the first experience that people encounter. His notion of *mundo patente* makes evident that he saw the sensible world as the first step towards making sense of life. This is what he would call circumstance. Those circumstances can be understood as the immediate circumstances but are also composed of the larger circumstances. In that sense, it is possible to interpret Agua Clara and Plaza Comunitaria as the circumstances of Tomasita, Vero, and Alicia. They also talk about their circumstances growing up. Eventually the crucial circumstance is that due to different reasons they do not attend school. It is in their tackling of these circumstances that their dramas unravel.

The second notion in Ortega's philosophy is the vital experience. Ortega is credited with coining the term *vivencia* in Spanish to translate the German concept of *Erlebnis* (D'Olhaberriague, 2006). He advocated for *vivencia* as radical experience of life as a function to intellectual pursuits. *Vivencia* receives meaning from the experience of the sensible world. This made a difference to my research by helping me see lived experience in the context of their circumstance rather than as an isolated interpretation of experience. In thinking through their *vivencias* I had to look at how they talked about their circumstances while explaining their experience studying. Also, *vivencias* needed to be presented in ways that honored that vital aspect of their experience. Although *vivencias* are not limited to, but are present in the several poems presented for each Plaza Comunitaria women. Each poem presents a part of the mosaic of their vital experience.

Finally, I appreciate the idea of *creencia*. Ortega y Gasset suggests that to understand *vivencias* it is necessary to understand the system of beliefs. For example, Alicia speaks of how the people of Agua Clara are not lazy or ignorant, and that outsiders need to grapple with this before making judgements. In Tomasita, I see how she reflects on her life redefining the labels that had been imposed on her. In Vero, I see the systems of beliefs that sustain the study group in *solidaridad* and *familia*.

Historical Reason

Ortega y Gasset contrasted the physical-mathematical reason with his idea of historical reason. The physical-mathematical reason builds on a mechanic of the world. The nature of things can be analyzed and taken apart, the relationship between things found. In contrast, the historical reason is a narrative reason. Building on the notion the “substance” of humans is its “past” manifest as presence, Ortega y Gasset (2001) argues that “to understand something that is human, whether personally or collectively, we need to tell a story” (p. 92). He elaborates “An individual or a nation is this or does that because before has been this or done that” (p.92).

The notion of historical reason is an effort understand the individual through this individual’s past, and narrating its past. According to Ortega y Gasset humans do not have nature, only past. History is to humans what nature is to things. If an individual analyzes the past random events and details will be part of a first investigation. However, in those details “the major lines that reflect society” (p.95) will start to emerge.

Ortega y Gasset posited that we can only understand life when we see it as drama. Past, present, and circumstances are key points to understand life as movement. The method to understand such life then should bend to accommodate our investigation of life. In my study, this approach allowed me to pay more attention to how that drama in the lives of students of Plaza Comunitaria evolved. First, that drama is introduced as they expressed their goals in the context of their circumstances and past along with the multiple obstacles. Second, drama is present as I saw it evolve over time as they kept studying.

For Ortega y Gasset the physical-mathematical reason distances itself from the object of study it seeks to understand, it attempts to studying it as a mere fact. He argues that historical reason is more rigorous because it does show the historical processes that undergird those unquestioned facts:

La razón histórica no acepta nada como mero hecho, sino que fluidifica todo hecho en el *fieri* de que proviene: ve como se hace el hecho. No cree aclarar los fenómenos humanos reduciéndolos a un repertorio de instintos y “facultades” - que serían, en efecto, hechos brutos, como el choque y la atracción -, sino que muestra lo que el hombre hace con esos instintos y facultades, e inclusive nos declara como han venido a ser esos “hechos” - los instintos y las facultades. (p. 101)

Historical reason, on the other hand, it does not accept anything as a mere fact, but fluidifies all facts in the *fieri* where it comes from. It does not seek to clarify human phenomena reducing it to a repertoire of instincts and “faculties.” – that would be, effectively, raw facts, such as impact and attraction -, but it shows what humans do with those instincts and faculties, even it tells us how those “facts” came to be – the instincts and faculties. (p.101; my translation)

In his book *En Torno a Galileo* Ortega y Gasset (2005) posits that historians approach data with a notion of what life is (p.67). A purely empirical history would be a compilation of facts, and not history at all. In Plaza Comunitaria, I learn to see the aspiration to learning as vital experience. Women of Plaza Comunitaria take on the task (*faena*) of tackling their circumstances. Without changing their *quehaceres* [to-do] they adopt the task of attending school as *quehacer*. The structure of human life consists of that dynamic of person and circumstances. History seeks to understand the changes in that drama. Ortega y Gasset (2005) explains in *En torno a Galileo*:

La vida es lo contrario al utopismo y al ucronismo – es tener que estar en cierto aquí y en un insustituible ahora. El presente del destino humano, presente en el cual estamos viviendo- mejor dicho, presente que somos nosotros; se entiende, nuestras vidas individuales – es el que es porque sobre él gravitan todos los otros presentes, todas las

otras generaciones. Si estos presentes pasados, si la estructura de la vida en esas generaciones hubiese sido otra nuestra situación sería también distinta. En este sentido cada generación lleva en sí todas las anteriores y es como un escorzo de la historia universal. (p. 94)

The Plaza Comunitaria stories are generative narratives. They can be interpreted, they can be felt, and they can give many meaning to our own experiences. They are essentially stories-history. Each narrative, and *vivencia* contributes another perspective to what I witnessed in Plaza Comunitaria. Along with Ortega y Gasset we can appreciate that the individual is destiny and not substance. I articulate my methodology to attend to this drama, and not see the human experience as a substance.

Cartesianism of life

According to Ortega y Gasset the first philosophy is an invitation to engage with the day-to-day tasks of life, in other words, life engaging with *quehacer*. In the naturalist tradition, the individual is an object of study. Ortega y Gasset proposed we study the individual as facing the circumstances, the human in the making. Individual as biography that turns into history.

To live is to engage with a *faena*. It defines who are as humans. *Faena* is that which humans engage as a task of our life. In Plaza Comunitaria, women take on the circumstances that are presented to them, and they engage in a life project. To live is not being, is happening (*vivir no es ser, es acontecer*). To live is to act in a world-scenario that one does not choose.

My *quehacer* reflects how I deal with my surroundings, and I act accordingly. This is what I see in the stories of Plaza Comunitaria. Ortega y Gasset starts a philosophical anthropology that I believe can become a vitalist ethnography. Ortega y Gasset (2001) advanced his idea that life cannot be understood as “a thing (p.77).” He eloquently continued his argument about thinking about life:

Human life, therefore, it is not a thing, it does not have a nature. Consequently, it is necessary to be determined to think about life, with categories, with concepts radically different from those that we use to clarify phenomena of the matter. It is a difficult undertaking. (p.77 my translation)

La vida humana, por lo visto, no es una cosa, no tiene una naturaleza, y, en consecuencia, es preciso resolverse a pensarla con categorías, con conceptos radicalmente distintos de los que nos aclaran los fenómenos de la materia. La empresa es difícil.

Life is *quehacer*. Life is always in the making. Life is drama and its circumstances present themselves as stage in which the drama of the individual takes place. This also means we can write our own novels out of our lives (*noverlarnos*), whether those novels are original or plagiarized. Life projects are a response to our circumstances. Life projects demand the use of our imagination, because the individual creates, in this process, the character to be played (p.86).

Convivencia and Plaza Comunitaria

Ortega y Gasset's thought has already assisted in developing the notion of *convivencia*. In a transnational ethnographic study of rural women in México, Galván (2015) explained her research methodology of *convivencia*. She discusses the foundations *convivencia* through the morphology of the word (*con-vivencia*). The first part *con* (with) expresses the communality of experience. Women study in community, they help each other and live their pedagogical experiences together. Galván (2015) then takes on the notion of *vivencia* and traces the history of this word to Ortega y Gasset. Galván (2015) connects *vivencia* to lived experience. *Vivencia* also coincides with Ortega y Gasset's starting point: the individual. In the individual life, he would pay attention first to belief (*la creencia*). Belief guides the system of life. In *Historia como Sistema* Ortega y Gasset (2001) explains:

We can now say: the diagnosis of the human existence – whether is an individual, a group, or a time period – has to start understanding the system of convictions, and for that, before anything, establishing the fundamental belief, the decisive, that which carries and enlivens all others (p. 68 my translation).

Así podemos decir ahora: el diagnóstico de una existencia humana —de un hombre, de un pueblo, de una época— tiene que comenzar filiando el sistema de sus convicciones, y para ello antes que nada, fijando su creencia fundamental, la decisiva, la que porta y vivifica todas las demás. (p.68)

Convivencia is important to my research because as I became more familiar with Vero, Tomasita, and Alicia, their beliefs driving their efforts started to emerge. At first, they would express their passion in what they did. Eventually they expressed fundamental beliefs about who they are and how those beliefs guided their actions. Those beliefs helped them make sense of their *vivencias*, and their circumstances. Santos Baez (2013) explains: “beliefs position us in the reality, in life. It is through them that we solve our circumstance” (p. 58).

The concept of historical reason is comprised of the systems of beliefs, the mental schemas of the individual, the past, generation and culture. This work builds on Ortega’s notions. He lays out a foundation for considering life as the key to inquiry and provides the ideas that will inform such inquiry. Each chapter contains several poetic pieces that stem from the transcribed interviews. I used those pieces to interpret, and present the narratives, and as the basis for my analysis of those narratives. Those pieces project the narrative. The words of women of Plaza Comunitaria are the starting point. Each piece is a window into the Orteguian categories of historical reason, that is, beliefs, and the mental schemas of the individual, the past and culture. Through the unique *vivencias* portrayed in those poems we can understand how women of Plaza Comunitaria take on the challenges posed by their

circumstances.

In Ortega y Gasset we can appreciate a movement towards the circumstances and toward the individual with *vivencias* at the center. His *ideario* is rich in notions that situate experience of life as the basis to construct a method of inquiry. He offers a philosophical anthropology full of analytical tools that enable the ethnographer to find the vital streams throughout the process of inquiry.

In this chart, I summarize the major ideas from Ortega y Gasset that drive this chapter. It is inspired in some of the most significant works of Ortega y Gasset such as *Meditaciones del Quijote* (1914), *En Torno a Galileo* (2005), and *La Historia como Sistema* (2001). I also draw from the work of Lasaga-Medina's explanations to *En Torno a Galileo*, particularly I am indebted to Ilundáin-Agurruza (2014) theorization of *raciovitalismo* in sports. The work of Granell (1960), a disciple of Ortega, contributed some reflections regarding the pedagogical implications of Ortega's ideas. I created the chart "Cartesianism of life" to help me visualize and connect a vast array of complex ideas that emerged from Ortega y Gasset thought (González, 2002). I have diligent in making sense of those ideas, and I am responsible for any confusion.

In this chart, his ideas parallel each other. This chart flows from bottom to top. The first level is the level of the individual. The second corresponds to the historical reason where *vivencia* and *convivencia* take place. This is also the level in which the individual faces life as drama and confronts the decision of living an authentic life. As the individual attempts this task the reason becomes a function of life. The third level, accounts for the stage of the circumstances that confront the individual. The chart below stands as an *ideario* because it is about the "world of ideas" derived from Ortega y Gasset.

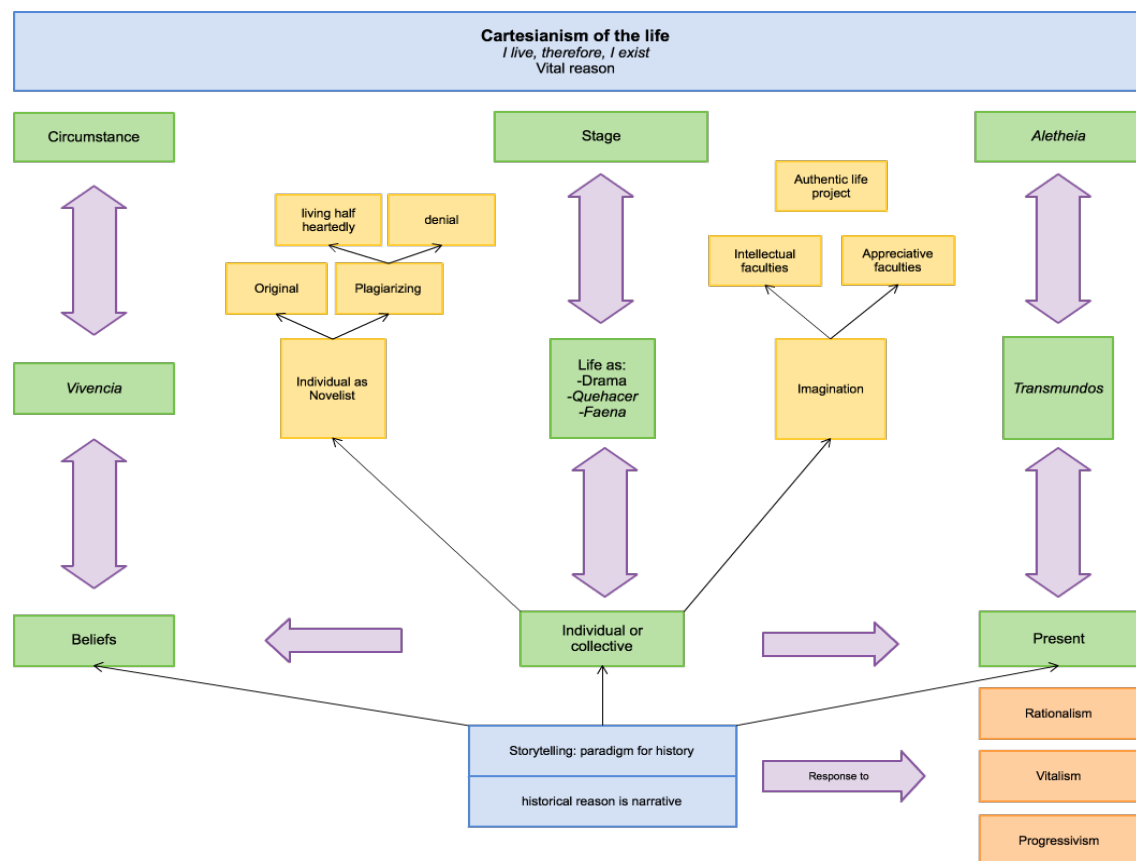


Figure 2. Cartesianism of life

CHAPTER THREE

Methodological Notes

“The potential power of poetic inquiry is to do as poetry does, that is to synthesize experience in a direct and affective way, although a certain amount of contextualizing may be necessary for the fullest appreciation of poetry in a research setting, it is my contention that the best examples of inquiry poems are good poems in and of themselves”

Monica Pendergast

Poetic Inquiry (2006 p. xxii)

“La cultura nos proporciona objetos ya purificados, que alguna vez fueron vida espontánea e inmediata, y hoy, gracias a la labor reflexiva, parecen libres del espacio y del tiempo, de la corrupción y del capricho.”

José Ortega y Gasset

Meditaciones del Quijote (1914, p.39)

Ortega’s Cartesianism of Life and Plaza Comunitaria

In the previous chapter, I explained the philosophy of Ortega y Gasset regarding my epistemological approach to research, and uncovered rationalist assumptions that would run counter to a vitalist approach to ethnography. My next question is: How does his philosophy connect to my research methodologies in Plaza Comunitaria? To criticize the agenda of modernity, Ortega y Gasset proposed the notion of life as the center for reason and inquiry. His thought shifted the role of reason: life as a vital experience guides reason, not the other way around. He considered the classical cultural values insufficient and elaborated on the principles that can guide the cultural imperatives. He posited complementary values that he coined vital imperatives (Ortega y Gasset, 2004).

Esfera del sujeto	Imperativo cultural	Imperativo vital
Sentimiento	Belleza	Deleite
Voluntad	Bondad	Impetuosidad
Pensamiento	Verdad	Sinceridad

Table 2. Cultural and vital imperatives according to Ortega y Gasset

Academic endeavors may align with cultural imperatives when those endeavors seek truth and goodness. Educational researchers are not foreign to this attitude, for example they strive towards the common good, reaching out to marginalized communities, changing our mental frames, and constructing pedagogies that stem from the intellectual resources of communities. Those practices resonate with the cultural imperative that Ortega y Gasset called *bondad* (goodness). I sum, I see that academia has built-in research practices that gesture towards ethics. Through those practices, I have learned the importance of the clarity of argument, being mindful of my audience, organizing my writing, designing research protocols, and foreseeing ethical concerns.

However, scholarly practices can turn into using arguments as “*técnicas de laboratorio mental*” (Granell, 1960), that I see as consequence of a rationalist logic. In other words, academic discourse becomes a mental exercise that resembles a calculated response. Language educators call this phenomenon *linguistic enabling* (Ranney, 2012) to describe when students learn how speak or write academically without concern for inquiry and discovery. In both cases, learning how to use scholarly language does not necessarily leads to a sense of awe (Granell, 1960). I resonate with Ortega y Gasset’s idea that the pure application of a method is not sufficient. Research efforts are not complete without the vital imperatives. I will elaborate on how those cultural and vital imperatives connect to Plaza Comunitaria research. Women of Plaza Comunitaria had taken on a life project that had consumed their lives. That was a very salient connection to *raciovitalismo*.

Deleite came into play when I started playing poetic inquiry. Looking at the artistry of

their *voces cotidianas* focused me on the struggles and visions they portrayed (i.e., Alicia's struggles with the administration, Tomasita's struggle being labeled as ignorant, or reflecting on the metaphorical language that Vero used to describe what sustained their study group). Narrative relied on my experiences. It also explains how those interactions evoked feelings in me as researcher (the description of Alicia's house, and Plaza Comunitaria building-settings of many of the events described, or the multiple references to the context). In both cases the experience of writing connected to *deleite*.

Ethical Commitments

My four ethical commitments seek to explain how I responded to the *impetuosidad* I encountered at Plaza Comunitaria women. In those commitments, I also explained my particular perspective on *bondad* as it concerns this research project. To provide an account of what I lived I recur to resources found in an ethnographic toolbox. I also made every effort to write with *sinceridad*. My analysis consists in multiple reflections on how I learned to see myself. I use decolonial research traditions to fuel such analysis.

An important aspect of my research project is the ethics of research that I express through my ethical commitments. Those commitments provided guidance in what to observe/witness (first stance: desire to highlight goodness), how to observe (second stance: act *respetuosamente*), what should count as valuable data and knowledge (third stance: mindful of colonialism), and how to respond to that (fourth stance: adopt an attitude of learning).

As shown in the Table 3 "Ethical commitments and research" I position my ethical commitments in dialogue with different aspects of research practices. Each of those commitments impacted how I selected the site, interacted with the participants, collected and analyzed data, and reflected on my positionality. I also summarize the practices those commitments led me enact on the field and beyond.

What are my research commitments?	What are the sources?	How did I do it?
Desire to highlight goodness	Site and Participants	Letting them guide my participation in their own spaces, and remaining attentive to their own ways of working.
Act respetuosamente	Data collection	Adapting to their life rhythm (sometimes fast, sometimes slow). I had to be welcomed first in any of their spaces or events, conversations. Which emphasizes data collection as a human/personal endeavor. Convivencia
Mindful of colonialism	Data analysis, and positionality, writing process	Staying open to their voices with capacity to speak to privileged educational settings. <i>Vox participare</i> Storying
Adopt a stance of learning	Positionality Possibility	Avoiding the assumption that I had “gained” certain knowledge to pass on to them. Convivencia

Table 3. Ethical Commitments and research

Desire to Highlight Goodness

The Oxford English Dictionary defines goodness in several ways. The first entry states that goodness is: The quality of being morally good; virtue; worthiness. This first is often in the context of piety. The second entry states: A good quality; a merit, a virtue. In both cases the definitions move between goodness as virtue and goodness as something of excellent quality. In that sense, I see goodness as an encompassing term that bridges my observations about the ethics of the people and the products of their efforts. In Plaza Comunitaria the observable aspects of their work cannot be separated from students’ ethics.

As I will explore later: *solidaridad*, *compañerismo* and *convivencia* are intertwined with more specific aspects of their work such as enrolling students in Plaza Comunitaria, tutoring, and the administrative responsibilities.

In my research highlighting goodness is an intentional effort to focus on the excellence of work in Plaza Comunitaria as well the ethics stemming from their personal lives, which I see as inseparable. When I write the narratives of their work and study efforts I do not compare those to any other external measure (i.e., Plaza Comunitaria indicators of success). I used to the visions they shared with me (and more specifically their own words as poetry) as a guiding principle in interpreting their own work. For example, in Alicia's chapter, I contrasted Alicia's critique of the program design emphasis on proving effectiveness by the number of graduates with her own leadership project. That vision included a description of what she sees as the need and her emphasis on knowing who are the people. I see Alicia as an accomplished educator not because of measures of effectiveness but because she had a vision that emerged from both her life's circumstances and her commitment to avoid blaming the people for not attending school.

However, some questions might arise: If we highlight goodness, then how can we identify areas for improvement? Does that mean we turn a blind eye to what is inconvenient? First, in the notion of improvement, I see Cartesian assumptions that life can be controlled, and moved from point A to a supposedly better point B. However, if I define improvement within a non-rationalistic framework, more specifically as the *faenas* people undertake, I find that my commitment does not stand in opposition to improvement. Alicia's critique that the program evaluation standards does not mean she disregarded enrollment numbers. It means that the framework to understand why we could see "numbers" in Plaza Comunitaria is Alicia desire to share an experience she had enjoyed. Women of Plaza Comunitaria undertook their life challenges with a desire to make things better, or as Alicia put it: *saliendo adelante*

[getting ahead]. They were always working on their life project. In Orteguian terms *novelando su vida* [writing the novel of their life].

This ethical commitment also served as an intervention to resist any impulse to act as some type of expert. Resisting this impulse did not mean that we could not learn mutually from our interactions. On the one hand, I was learning as a researcher. Often times they pointed at how some of my interview questions prompted them to reflect on events or ideas that they did not think would be of interest. On the other hand, at some point they asked for specific help when they wanted to prepare for their English test. One could say that I had a piece of knowledge they wanted. Rather than an expert sharing knowledge, I see this as mutually sharing unique experiences.

Act Respetuosamente: Data Collection

The women of Plaza Comunitaria modeled an ethos of *respeto*. One way of understanding *respeto* is as a form of politeness, that on the part of the researcher would require cultural competence. That sense of the word is evident in some of the dialogues of the analytical chapters. In many conversations with Alicia, Tomasita and Vero they would call me “*maestro*.” They consistently addressed me using the formal *usted*. I always called them *doña* and addressed them using the formal *usted*. In the case of Alicia, we eventually addressed each other using the informal *tu*. Another way of interpreting *respeto* is as mutual admiration. Women of Plaza Comunitaria fueled their *compañerismo* with mutual admiration. They recognized the strengths of their *compañeras* facing difficult circumstances. They often talked about such admiration. I saw a very specific example when Vero and Tomasita graduated, and Alicia posted heartfelt words of congratulation. This sense of *respeto* requires on the part of the researcher not just cultural competence but reciprocity.

That reciprocity meant that data collection became a process of interacting *respetuosamente* with participants. In other words, a process of developing an admiration of

their work and efforts. While I recorded and transcribed interviews, data collection went beyond the interviews and the policy context to include my perceptions of Agua Clara, recollections of conversations at the dinner table, at the school, and walking on the streets. I remained attentive to any event that would help me craft a more holistic vision of Alicia, Vero and Tomasita.

Alicia's generosity and collaborative attitude made possible the data collection process. She never hesitated in taking a break from her busy life to sit down with me, debrief my experiences, answer my questions, and put me in contact with other students. The admiration I developed for Alicia's work and hospitality sparked my desire to return the village of Agua Clara to continue witnessing her ongoing work. In this process, I also learned about Alicia's study group and started learning from those efforts as well. Our informal conversations over lunch or dinner inform my narratives as much as the poetic analysis I conducted using the interview transcripts.

Mindful of Colonialism

The stories are at the forefront of each analytic chapter. They unfold as they are. At some points during the narrative, the reader will appreciate the words of the protagonists in poetic form guiding the narrative. Poetry and narrative constitute the entry points into inquiry. In the early stages of this research, the stories were more limited quotations presented in a somewhat distanced fashion. These stories resisted that arrangement. Once they emerged as stories, they resisted being disassembled as such. I, then, accepted the stories of Plaza Comunitaria speak volumes on their own. Stories and poems are already an analytic framework.

Decolonial research makes it possible to put the voices of women of Plaza Comunitaria in direct conversations with the readers. When I shared the poem *Vida entre las Plantas* with a native Spanish-speaking graduate student, he expressed that his first thought

was that poems came from an accomplished writer, and that I was using the words of that accomplished writer as a starting point to the experiences of Plaza Comunitaria women. While the latter is what I am doing through the poems, his interpretation of Tomasita as an accomplished writer resonates with my goal of positioning the voices of Plaza Comunitaria women on equal footing with readers. The mode in which research on marginalized communities is presented can predispose readers to consider their stories with more openness.

The second comment he made was: "When I did not understand some words, I just assumed it was my ignorance." His words highlighted some other decolonial potentialities in this research. The poem *Vida entre las Plantas* that this graduate student had just read precisely came from an interview where Tomasita expressed how even hearing the word *ignorancia* caused her pain. The graduate student assumed there was nothing wrong with Tomasita's words. He wondered about what he did not understand instead. This interaction helped me to appreciate the full circle of Tomasita's journey, from her feelings being hurt by listening to the word *ignorancia* to speaking as someone who asserts her own value without apologies. In a way, reading narrative and poetry creates a mirror effect in which the reader looks inwardly.

Poems and narratives generate thought and discussion every time I share them, whether is with undergraduate students, graduate students or faculty members. Every reader brings new insights and new connections to their own topics of interest. As reader, you are invited to reflect on those stories and seek its reverberations. I will present my analysis, reflections, and discussions as another voice.

Adopting a Stance for Learning: Researcher's Positionality

While conducting research in Agua Clara I was well positioned to "enter" my chosen site and conduct research. I am a national Mexican, from the state of Yucatán. My parents grew up in villages in the Yucatán Peninsula which gave me many stories about my past that

resonated with the study participants. I could communicate in Spanish.

In other ways, I was aware of my position of privilege growing up in the capital city of the state with access to schools, universities, and businesses. I had graduated from college there and became a high school teacher. I started this research project as part of a doctoral program in a U.S. institution of higher education. Through my professional efforts, I had developed personal and professional networks beyond anything I could have ever dreamed of. While present in the village I was keenly aware of my ability to navigate privileged spaces in the U.S and México.

While I was pursuing graduate studies at U.S. institutions, as a native speaker of Spanish I came to better understand firsthand the frustrations of not being able to “get your point across” or when some of my ideas would be “lost in translation.” All of this happens in a context where you have lived in a second language, and switching back to your native language is not an option. I realized I had to work twice as hard to compensate for what I did not know. Those experiences gave me other sensibilities by the time I returned to México to start my doctoral research on an adult education program. If I was going to write and present this work at conferences it had to honor the voices of my participants. This research project is a journey of finding ways of listening to the voices of the study participants and developing as a researcher that attends to the human side of researching while still being intellectually persuasive in the context of a US Ph.D. program

In this dissertation, instead of looking for pedagogies that can be implemented in adult education programs in rural communities, I am looking for the pedagogies that women are already living in practice. It was clear that I needed to practice methods other than those I had studied in my university-based research methods courses to really “access” spaces of learning, sensitive to learning and the ways of being in the village. I looked for methods that captured the richness of the context in which these pedagogies are enacted. Every year, I

came back new lines of inquiry developed and the “plot thickened”. This dissertation is a project that has evolved and keeps evolving with my development as a doctoral student.

Analytical Tools Through the Artistry of *Voces Cotidianas*

After spending several years reflecting and writing on data from Agua Clara, it became evident that there was more to the stories than my analytical tools allowed me to perceive. In many of my interviews, women studying in Plaza Comunitaria recalled their experiences with tears. It was clear to me that those emotional and vital moments of the interviews needed to be taken into consideration to understand what Ortega y Gasset (1914) would call spontaneous life. At some point, I realized that many sections of the transcriptions had poetic elements. After reflecting and investigating further, I found out that speech had indeed been investigated through poetic lenses (Cahnmann, 2003; Prendergast, Leggo & Sameshima, 2009), and particularly in relationship to marginalized youth (Görlich, 2016).

I eventually wrote the chapters that present the personal narratives of Alicia, Tomasita and Vero based on the poems that emerged from those transcribed interviews. They guided the structure and sequence of those chapters. The poems also helped me interact with the ethnographic materials I had gathered through my fieldnotes. I see them as a form of “grid” that assisted me in selecting what pieces from all I had written would go into each profile. Each of the poems highlight experiences that Tomasita, Vero and Alicia connected to their endeavors of going back to school. In this section, I will take one of those poems (Silencio-Silencing) and use it to exemplify how it connects to conceptualizations of the poetics of everyday talk. Those intrinsic poetic elements present in the speech of women of Plaza Comunitaria guided me in composing the narratives, and later self-reflecting as an educator and researcher.

Pendergast, Leggo and Sameshima (2009) suggest that research carried out within the framework of poetic inquiry can be classified in three broad categories based on the

precedence of the voice of poetry: *vox autoethnographica*, *vox theoria*, and *vox participare*. The first one, *vox autoethnographica*, encompasses poetic inquiry that is conducted through the voice of the researcher. In this case, the researcher would create poetry. In this study, I could have, for instance, looked at my field notes and analyzed them as poetry. However, that is not how I approached my fieldnotes. In *Vox theoria* the researcher would look at texts that build the theoretical underpinnings as poetry, all academic texts such as literature reviews, books, articles, can be considered under this category. In the case of this study, an example would be if I had studied the work of Ortega y Gasset as poetry. Tasks that others have undertaken, and is not what I did in this study. Finally, poetic inquiry becomes *vox participare* when the inquiry approaches the voices of the participants as poetry, and that is what my approach to inquiry is about.

Once I had selected several pieces of *vox participare* poetry from transcriptions, I spend time sharing it with different readers to get a sense of how they reacted. At that time, I did not anticipated the range of responses that resonated with various readers in different contexts. Görlich (2016) explains that poetic inquiry is a “method of creating evocative analyses that are able to broaden understandings, create dialogue and increase understanding of the polyvocality of experience” (p. 526). Throughout the chapters, I often refer to readers/listeners because their voices eventually merged with my analysis when I put them in conversation with Vero, Alicia and Tomasita. Once more, I perceived another connection between between the notions of polyvocality and dialogicity with how my self reflections wove the voices of readers, and women of Plaza Comunitaria. I understand this as a multiperspectivism characteristic of *razón histórica* proposed by Ortega y Gasset.

Cahnmann (2003) explains that “another shared aspect of craft in poetry and qualitative research is documentation of everyday detail” (p. 32). One of those details of everyday life included accounts of events that endured in the memories of women of Plaza

Comunitaria. The following paragraph is a section extracted from Tomasita's interview transcription:

No, me pasaba fuera de acá, Mérida porque mis hermanas hasta por teléfono en maya hablamos, con ellas, si pura maya, no español, ni nada, entonces nos oían hablar y se reían de nosotras, ya viste cómo está hablando esa india y si me incomodaba y cuando estábamos yo con ella, pues procurábamos no platicar, cuando teníamos a lado a una persona que, en la combi que estábamos allá no platicábamos o así en voz baja hablábamos, para que no nos digan cosas y así hacíamos, pero ahorita eso de que me digan india yo creo que le contestaría, si me da orgullo ahorita saber maya porque, ya le digo ahorita que estudio me ayuda mucho a entender muchas cosas, de antes tenía yo mucha ignorancia. (June 2014)

A poem would eventually emerge from this section. Before that happened, I reflected on this part noticing it was an instance of Tomasita experiencing linguistic discrimination. Furthermore, as I will explain later, the repetitional patterns made this section discursively less dense and thus easy to report as an incidence. However, that does not align well with a poetic inquiry approach. Cahnmann (2003) explains that “a poetic approach to inquiry requires a keen sense of noticing from data collection and analysis to descriptive writing as foundational for an interpretive outcome” (p. 32). I realized that given the emotional significance there was more than I could see at a first glance. Attentive to my ethical commitments, I paid closer attention to this section as a unique experience, and those repetitive patterns started to reveal a storytelling structure. I would eventually connect this approach to inquiry to vital reason. I rendered the poem in Spanish in the following way:

Silencio

Por Tomasita

Mis hermanas y yo,

en Maya hablamos,

pura Maya,

no español.

Entonces nos oían hablar,

y se reían de nosotras.

-¿Ya viste cómo está hablando esa india?

¡Y me incomodaba!

Cuando estábamos... yo con ella,

pues procurábamos no platicar.

Cuando teníamos a lado una persona en la combi,

allá no platicábamos.

O así en voz baja hablábamos,

para que no nos digan cosas...

By thinking about the “lens” I used to inquire about this poem I concluded it helped me accomplish three goals: focusing the analysis, magnifying Plaza Comunitaria women’s voices, and projecting the narratives. In addition to that, as Görlich (2016) explains, the importance of poetic inquiry lies in “its capacity to enhance the dialogue, embrace complexity and include emotions” (p. 523). This approach resonates with my theoretical framework in that the starting point are the life experiences that guide any inquiry. In

Tomasita's chapter I uncover her story through this poem and others, that emerged from multiple interviews. In all cases, I present poems in both English and Spanish. For now, I will focus on making explicit connections between this section of the interview and the poetics of everyday talk. To accomplish that, I will use the English rendition I made of the poem.

Focus

As I moved through the pages of transcription, I felt compelled to stop at places that struck me by their emotional significance. The poems of Plaza Comunitaria emerged as clear, delineated, and emotional lines that gave away the significance of an emancipation project. I wanted my research to honor the vital experiences of women of Plaza Comunitaria, and therefore my methodology needed some aesthetic and poetic mechanisms in order to communicate what was already present in their language. I then decided to find ways to explain why the voices of Plaza Comunitaria women were very artistic.

Tannen (2006) gave me the language I needed to make sense of those mechanisms through her notion of the poetics of talk. She argues that there are several features evidencing the poetics elements of talk in daily life conversations. Tannen (2007) explains that repetition is a poetic element of language. In my study of Plaza Comunitaria repetition was a clear element in the pieces of interview transcription I had chosen. Repetition caught my attention and prompted me to inquire deeper into those sections. Tannen (2007) suggests five functions of repetition as a poetic device of everyday conversation. Those functions are: production, comprehension, connection, interaction, and personal involvement through coherence. In the next section, I explain those functions, using the English version of the poem I presented earlier as an example.

Production

Tannen (2006) states that "repetition allows a speaker to set up a paradigm and slot in new information-where the frame for the new stands ready , rather than having to be newly

reformulated. (p. 58)” Such paradigm clearly emerged in Tomasita’s speech. I will take as an example Tomasita’s poem Silencio:

A

1 My sisters and I,
2 speak in Mayan,
3 Mayan only,
4 No Spanish.

B

5 Then, they heard us talk,
6 - “¿Ya viste cómo está hablando esa india?”
7 They laughed at us.
8 It made me very uncomfortable!

C

9 When my sister and I were together,
10 we made every effort not to talk.

D

11 If someone was sitting next to us in the bus,
12 we would not talk.
13 If we did,
14 we would speak softly,
15 so they don’t mock us...

Tomasita’s production in this poem presents two patterns. The first pattern is about who are the characters of the story. The second pattern refers to what they do. I want to take a closer look at the first pattern. In this poem Tomasita uses the first lines of each stanza to

present the characters of the story, namely, Tomasita and her sisters. Tomasita consistently presents in all the opening lines (1, 5, 9, 11) the characters of the story. The words: “sisters and I”, “us”, “together”, and “us”, highlighted in this poem, show the repetition of the central characters of the story. The second pattern has to do with the main action of the story which is talking or speaking. The pattern emerges early in line 2 indicating they speak in Yucatec Maya, their mother tongue. The action continues in lines 5, 6, 10, 12, 14 where she uses the verbs talk and speak. This structure sets up a very clear paradigm that Tomasita used to produce her story.

The first stanza (A) describes the communicative context. In the original version in Spanish (line 3) Tomasita says *pura Maya*. Although *pura* can be translated as pure, Tomasita is not using this word as an adjective as if she were qualifying her native tongue. Her use corresponds to the colloquial use of the word in the context of Yucatán. She uses the word *pura* as an adverb to mean only. Another way of translating this word could be purely, in the sense of entirely or exclusively. In other words, when she is together with her sister they speak no other than Maya. This sense becomes stronger she ends that stanza by saying: “no Spanish.” The second stanza (B) presents the complication and disturbance of the story. It introduces new characters. (see “they” in line 5) their actions (line 7 they laugh at Tomasita and her sister), she quotes their words (line 6) and presents her own response in that moment.

The last two stanzas (C, D) continue intertwining the two overlapping patterns of repetition. She weaves in the first pattern in lines 9 and 11, the opening lines of the last two stanzas. Tomasita prefaces the last two stanzas them by describing a situation in which she is together with her sisters. In line 9, Tomasita describes a general situation when she is spending time with her sister. This situation becomes more specific when she depicts herself being on bus with her sisters on their way to the capital of the state of Yucatán. Line 9 and 11 are connected by the words “together” and “us”. The second pattern that corresponds to the

main action of the story can be observed in the lines 10, 12, 13, and 14. In those lines, the verbs talk and speak (*platicar* and *hablar*) become a paradigm for describing her experience. In this case, the new information that is added to this paradigm of talk-speak is the process of silencing. This silencing process moves from making efforts not to talk through not talking at all, and ends with speaking softly to avoid shaming.

Comprehension

Tannen (2006) explains that repetition facilitates comprehension by “providing semantically less dense discourse” (p. 59). Because of this feature the receiver of information has more time to process the text. The reader/listener can focus on a central idea while the information keeps adding. In Tomasita’s poem “Silencio” the paradigm is clear. The opening lines 1 and 2 forecast the constitutive elements of the rest of the poem, that is the characters of the story (Tomasita and her sisters) and main action of the story (talk-speak). Then, the first line of every stanza starts with Tomasita and her sisters (lines 1, 5, 9, 11). In each stanza the lines following each opening line depict a story with the verbs talk and speak. These patterns are examples of the facilitation of comprehension. By overlapping two patterns (together-us with speak-talk) Tomasita is able to convey the experience of being of shamed in a few sentences creating an enduring memory in the reader/listener as well.

- 1 My sisters and I,
- 2 speak in Mayan,

Connection

Tannen (2006) explains that, at a surface level, the function of connection contributes to the cohesiveness of the discourse. At a more deeper level this cohesiveness contributes to amplify the new added elements. It intensifies the new parts that are also presented repeatedly with small modifications. In the poem “Silencio” once the reader/listener imagines the two

central characters of the story the focus goes to the emotional charge embedded in the evolving actions talk-speak. The structure shows a gradual move from happy talk in their language to being shamed for how they speak, their efforts to remain silent and finally resolving to speak softly as a compromise. Moreover, according to Tannen (2006) connecting discourse enhances the evaluative aspects of what is described. The evaluative features are also present in this poem. The repetition of her actions (talk-speak) from line 1 and up to line 5 set the stage for the new information (line 6) which are the words of those who shamed her. She ventriloquized line 6: “Did you hear how that indigenous woman speaks.” The section below shows three highly charged lines that Tomasita uses to show the disturbance of the story. If one reads/listen attentively it conveys the emotions of Tomasita, and it makes readers/listeners feel outraged.

5 Then, they heard us talk,
 6 - “¿Ya viste cómo está hablando esa india?”
 7 They laughed at us.
 8 It made me very uncomfortable!

The other two functions in the poetics of talk are *interaction* and *coherence as interpersonal involvement*. According to Tannen (2006) the first three “production, comprehension, and connection all refer to the creation of meaning in conversation” (p. 61). The last two functions emphasize the interactional nature of discourse. The speakers involved in that interaction bond, and in my particular case, listening to Tomasita’s story enhanced my appreciation of Tomasita’s efforts through Plaza Comunitaria and her study group. While I had interacted with Tomasita before, this interview was a pivotal moment in my research. Although this poem emerged in the context of one interview, its content builds from previous interactions and influenced later conversations. From then on, Tomasita would share many

more stories. Similarly, the friendships built with Alicia and Vero and Tomasita are also evidenced in their words.

Tannen (2006) explains that coherence as interpersonal involvement means that the the creation of discourse coherence through repetition constitutes evidence of one's participation and of a sense of familiarity. It sends a metamessage that relationships have been developed. Something I could not foresee at the time is that by reading and later analyzing those patterns through extended periods of time during the school year I was also developing a sense of familiarity, which in turn facilitated my visits every summer.

The series of poems presented throughout this research are inspired/written by Tomasita, Vero and Alicia who assisted me during this time conducting research. I translated the interview transcripts and arranged sections from those interviews into poetic form. I did not rephrase or change their wording. In a few occasions, I changed the sequence in which some sentences appear in the interview transcription. The poems are built with their words and ideas and experiences, thus I credit them for the authorship. Once I had rendered the poems in Spanish, I proceeded to translate those into English.

In the analytical chapters of Tomasita, Vero and Alicia, through the lenses of poetics of talk I expand the stories they shared with me. Through analysis of speech, I find yet another connection to my theoretical framework of vital reason. It helps me center my analysis in life as a guide of reason. By analyzing interview transcripts through poetic inquiry I started from the literal voices of Tomasita, Alicia and Vero recorded in the transcriptions and project those into the narratives of studying in *convivencia*. Cahnmann (2003) put it this way: "Images, anecdotes, phrases, or metaphors that are meaningful are those that keep coming back until the researcher-poet is sure the concrete detail means something more than itself" (p. 32 citing Wakowski, 1979).

Magnification

Voice comes through these poems. It is their words. I articulate my research inquiry through them, and in them; not on them or about them. I seek to let them speak. And the story that I found compelling over those summers is how they navigated education in their own terms. I have much to learn from them. I experienced “data collection and analysis” differently by paying close attention to the vitality of the voices of women of Plaza Comunitaria.

Pendergast, Lego and Sameshima (2009) present poetic inquiry research that explores the voices of participants by various scholars. In my work, I align with what they call *vox participare*. In this project, it becomes a way of paying attention to the voice of Plaza Comunitaria members, to open up channels to sense their experience. At the same time, such sensing builds an appreciation on the reader regarding bias and oppressive attitudes. It is a method that seeks to honor voices that have been labeled uneducated. It is a way of magnifying what they tell us. There is artistry in the *voces cotidianas* of Mexican rural women. Although a socially “not prestigious” dialect of Spanish it emerges with a strong voice.

As I show in the Table 4 “The artistry of voices cotidianas” through *voces cotidianas* I reinterpret elements of Tomasita’s speech that could be repetitive, awkward, and with wrong word choices I also give examples of how those devices that Tomasita uses in her speech make her message more powerful to reach a wider audience.

Perception	Through <i>vox participare</i>	Examples
Repetition	Parallelism	The main ideas of every stanza center around the words “speak” and “talk.” Every stanza amplifies the meaning of the previous one.
Awkward phrasing	Rhythm	<p>Tomasita uses many short sentences that build up on emotional charge. Occasionally there is a longer sentence that centers the reading on events that complicate the plot of the poem. The sentence: <i>¿Escuchaste a esa india hablar?</i> Needs to read as a vicious and shaming concept.</p> <p>Her words also flow from happy bilingual chatting (first stanza) at home to being shamed because of how they speak outside of home (second stanza) to a gradual silencing (third and fourth stanzas).</p>
Odd word choices	Linguistic repertoires, histories	Almud (in <i>Vida entre las Plantas</i>) and the constant use of <i>pretérito imperfecto indicativo</i> .

Table 4. The artistry of voces cotidianas

I also wish to clarify that by doing this, I am not advocating for a-grammatical language. I am rather proposing that this perspective allows us to appreciate the beauty of expression within this speech community. Looking at speech of everyday rural women can open more windows into their wisdom (Hymes, 1994; Cahnmann-Taylor 2003; Blommaert, 2006). Through these methodologies researchers can let data be driven by beauty.

It is commonplace, in the context of México, for people to say that the words of speakers of indigenous languages are full of awkward word choices, and their speech is repetitive. Through poetic inquiry, I can start perceiving rhythm and affect, and give more attention to voice and experience. We can also start seeing the beauty in their words. Finally, we can transform repetition into parallelism. Archaisms are also present in those poems. In this work, I pay attention to those words as their repertoires of history.

Projecting the Narrative

Narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 2004) or inquiry through narrative is an influential methodology in the imaginaries of teacher education (Huber, Li, Murphy, Nelson & Young; 2014), and inspires ideas about resistance in education (Villenas, 2001; Villenas, 2005). Research approaches that focus on narratives and storying have gained recognition among education scholars. Some of those are portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997), life histories, and *testimonio* (Delgado Bernal, Burciaga, & Flores Carmona (2012). While, I seek to overcome the more prescriptive aspects of narrative research approaches, I also situate my research among those voices.

Ortega y Gasset (2010) stated that “To understand something human, whether personal or collective, it is necessary to tell a story/history (p. 91).” The term *historia* in Spanish encompasses the idea of a story as well as history; thus, helping Ortega y Gasset justify his idea of historical reason through the radical reality of the individual. Vital reason attempts to *comprender* the individual as it tackles the surrounding circumstances. Ortega y Gasset starts with *comprender* when it comes to understanding phenomena in which human nature is involved. While the term *explicar* is the consequence of bringing a rationalist logic into the social and human sciences (*feticismo*), and it created what he coined as “the terrorism of laboratories”. In this way, he makes a distinction between the terms *explicar* and *comprender*. Ortega y Gasset argued that *razón pura* distances itself from the human phenomenon it seeks to understand while *razón histórica* encounters the human aspects face to face.

This style of narrative is an effort to connect to the Orteguian notions of vital reason and historical reason. The narratives of Plaza Comunitaria start with the individual grappling with her circumstances. The women of Plaza Comunitaria often reflected on the societal constraints, discrimination, material poverty. They also reflect on their communities around:

their families, children, husbands, work. They speak about their schooling experiences often reflecting on how this is a way of responding to their original circumstances, to their past. From it, they engage attending school as a *quehacer* (Gonzalez, 2001). For Plaza Comunitaria women, this engagement with school is also a *faena*. Also, even though I interacted with Vero, Tomasita and Alicia I present three different chapters with their stories and insights to be consistent with the perspectivism that Ortega y Gasset understood as inescapable.

Each analytical/narrative chapter (Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero) presents a profile of women of Plaza Comunitaria through the different pieces of *vivencias* they shared with me, and in which they made a participant. Each profile is a collection of *vivencias*. In the writing process, I often draw from English and Spanish placing both languages on the same plane. Translating their words, as recorded in transcriptions and in field notes became part of the experience of doing research. Every new iteration of texts had renewed meaning even though, every final version came out “cleaned up” and presented mostly in English.

Tomasita’s story, in particular, helped me understand the experience of silence and marginalization with words that disturb and heal. The word *talk* becomes a dirty word, as a reader of “Silence” expressed. She elaborated: I see talk as a completely natural word, it has always been an empowering word to me. In an environment where certain forms of speech are shamed. This is the space where, I committed myself to listen, and let their voices emerge. Poetic inquiry helped magnify those voices. Since many people from the state of Yucatán work in Merida, it is normal to travel. It is stressful for many people because sometimes they get lost in the city, or don’t have any friends there. Other times people travel to Mérida to do some shopping. These are the spaces where language discrimination keeps taking place.

Tomasita invites readers/listeners into her world. In the lines analyzed above, she opened up about crude experiences of marginalization as a Mayan woman. Several times, I

witnessed Tomasita and one of her sisters converse animatedly in Maya at her dinner table. I always remember that dinner table as a space of conversation, food sharing, study and laughter. In “Silencing” Tomasita made me feel the in the words of someone who says: “*Escuchaste a esa india hablar.*” I reacted strongly as I imagined this person who could not accept the presence of words accented with unfamiliar rhythms. Perhaps it is because in certain contexts I could be that *indio*, but in other contexts I could be the oppressor. She inspires me to keep my ears open to the multiple tones of Yucatec Mayan in the years to come. Her story keeps reverberating through this poem.

CHAPTER FOUR

Leadership in La Plaza Comunitaria

Alicia's Story

In this chapter, I share insights from Alicia's experiences, the local leader of the adult education program. The educational leadership she forged in the community allows us to appreciate an ethos of *solidaridad* and radical commitment to peer education. Alicia's voice emerges through narrative and poetic inquiry.

First Impressions

Alicia and Roberto hosted me during my first visit to Agua Clara. For 5 pesos, I took a *mototaxi* to get to Alicia's house from the main Plaza. Six blocks away from the Agua Clara's main plaza. "Take me to Alicia's house, the Plaza Comunitaria coordinator," I told the *motaxi* driver. He knew where to go. Once I got there, I paid for my ride and headed towards a fence built with rocks, painted in white, marking the limits of her house. The shade from the tree at the entrance offered some protection from the sun while I waited outside.

Alicia opened the doors of her house and invited me to settle in. The living room featured several pictures of Alicia. One of the pictures is from the time she was dating Roberto. In another picture, Alicia is posing in her wedding dress. A red couch contrasted with the blue paint of the living room. On the right side of the living room, before you enter the adjacent laundry room, is the dinner table.

Alicia's house was not yet finished. Next to the living room, on the right side, there were some cement foundations for another room, and some columns at the corners. On the left side of the main room, there was attached another small room, a type of hut. Alicia and Roberto use this space as a laundry and dish room. I later learned that Roberto had put some cement on that laundry room, and moved his sewing machine so that I could stay in the living room, the most comfortable room in the house. I could still see the building blocks that gave

a rustic look to the house. In one of the front corners of the property there is a running water tap. From that tap they fill up their water container, and get a steady supply of purified water for their daily activities.

To the left of the room, there is a bookshelf full of books. There are many books from the National Institute of Adult Education. Alicia told me those are the books that she used to get her middle school certificate. I saw another series of books. Alicia explained those are for the high school curriculum, also known as Prepa Abierta. I glanced at the covers of all the different subjects Alicia had been studying. Then, I saw a physics course pack. Alicia was stressed out about it. On one of the shelves there is Bible with a black soft cover and worn out red edges.

At the time, Alicia was studying through the Preparatoria Abierta program [Open High School], a non-formal education system that grants high school diplomas. In June, of 2013 she was studying mathematics. In the summer of 2014 Alicia and her *compañeras* had a study group to review their physics lessons. In the summer of 2015, she was ready to tackle her last subject: English as Foreign Language.

In that living room I learned many things about Plaza Comunitaria. That first summer, Alicia made me aware of tensions between the stated program goals and what she saw as the local needs. I wrote in my field notes (June 4th 2013) “After a few hours living with them, I realize that she is very active in several organizations in the community. Alicia is very interested in education. This is a very important aspect in her life.”

Work at Plaza Comunitaria

Alicia’s official title in Plaza Comunitaria is *promotora*. It means literally someone who promotes. Alicia explains that the program flexibility helps the Plaza Comunitaria to invite adult students. Alicia explained that she sees her role as a person who raises awareness of the importance of education. She makes door-to-door visits promoting the work of Plaza

Comunitaria in the village.

La Plaza opens Monday through Friday from 9am to 12pm and from 1pm to 5pm. Alicia is there most of the time. Students can come in and out anytime as their schedules permit them. They can study their modules in the computer lab for free. Adult students can also use printed booklets of the study modules. In those cases, Alicia makes arrangements to pair students with an *asesor* [tutor]. Alicia often had to advocate for the needs of Plaza Comunitaria. She explained that the regional administration does not have a grasp of the community needs. Inviting students, and growing the program is a local effort.

One of the major points of disagreement between Alicia and the regional administration is around the enrollment quotas. Alicia tells me that typically those goals are set in terms of expected quantity of students to be enrolled. *La Plaza* has an enrollment quota. Reaching the enrollment quota is one of the conditions to continue receiving funding.

Alicia works closely with the regional coordinator, who assists with administrative issues. Regional coordinators also keep track of the enrollment statistics. The regional coordinator communicates to the different programs of Plaza Comunitaria in the area the enrollment goals. To Alicia certain statistics meant little to how she understood success in Plaza. She wanted support to her local Plaza Comunitaria to be less attached to those performance indicators.

The regional coordinator had told Alicia that funding would increase if she increased the enrollment. Alicia sharply counters that point, “that means nothing it is really hard to recruit and keep adult students whose lives are already complicated. They don’t understand that. They tell us what numbers we need to reach, we never get strategies.” Alicia explained that some strategies might work across different villages, but there are many things that are specific. Inviting students requires several strategies that regional coordinators do not put into effect, usually is up to the *figuras solidarias* of Plaza Comunitaria to come up with ideas on

how to grow the program.

“You have to know people,” she added. I kept inquiring about her strategies. Alicia pointed that even having posters made by them, and not just the ones sent by the national program was important. But Alicia went into more detail when she talked about her efforts sustaining partnerships with certain programs external to Plaza Comunitaria. She first mentioned a partnership with a non-profit organization called *ProJoven* [Pro-Youth] to encourage women who dropped out school; due to financial problems, pregnancy, or any other issue, to continue their studies.

Alicia's tone of voice changed to a more defensive one. She is upset just to think that some people would think adult learners do not study because they are lazy. She talks about the work of Plaza Comunitaria not only as curricular or pedagogical, but also in relationship with other programs. Those programs would give me an idea of Alicia's understanding of the circumstances of the adults that come to Plaza Comunitaria.

She first mentioned *Un Kilo de Ayuda* [A Kilogram of Help] a program funded privately that provides basic groceries to people in need. By enrolling in Plaza Comunitaria adult students can request to be part of *Un Kilo de Ayuda*. Next, she shared about *El Buen Juez* [The Good Judge]. This is an INEA sponsored program seeking to help government employees [federal, state or local] to complete their schooling. Alicia then tells me how this program can bring about societal good.

La Plaza, as Alicia refers to it, in Agua Clara is also working out a partnership with a housing federal program (INFONAVYT). Partnership with the federal housing program would allow students count credits they have earned studying in a Plaza Comunitaria as installments toward their houses. For Alicia these non-profit organizations got at the heart of why students drop out. A year later the following explanation from Alicia would put things into perspective for me:

Por recursos económicos, mis papás no podían solventar los gastos de la familia, su familia de ellos es grande y tenía yo muchos hermanos menores y eso complicaba que nosotras pudiéramos seguir estudiando. Mi hermana y yo que éramos las que terminábamos la primaria, entonces, estén, en esa época se tenían que comprar libros, uniformes, pagar muchas cosas que requería porque no habían los apoyos que ahora el gobierno da para que la gente se pueda estar apoyando de ello.

Because of [the lack] of economical resources, my parents could not afford daily family expenses. The family was large. I had many younger brothers. That made it difficult for us to continue studying. My sister, and I were then finishing elementary school. Back then, you had to purchase books, uniforms, pay for many other things I needed because there were not the social programs that now the government has to support people. (June 2014)

Alicia understood adult students very differently from the regional coordinator. Alicia herself had experienced what it meant wanting to continue, having the desire, and (due to her circumstances) having to stop. Her family's precarious resources forced her parents to allocate the resources to her brothers who would go to school. Even though education was tuition free, her parents could not afford other expenses associated with attending school. The way she understood the circumstances of adult students explained why she did not care about enrollment numbers. She had a clear picture of the students' circumstances, and was determined to make everything possible to give everybody a chance. Figure 3 below portrays the Plaza Comunitaria building where Alicia pursued those dreams. I took this picture in the Summer of 2013. From Plaza Comunitaria I could see the Catholic Church on the other side of the main square.



Figure 3. Plaza Comunitaria building

Pedagogical Encounters

Alicia was always walking from one house to another delivering paperwork to students, or enrolling new ones. She went from one meeting to the next, talking to Plaza Comunitaria regional coordinators, the major, or organizing her *figuras solidarias*. She was also an active member of her local church. Along with her husband, she worked diligently on house projects, and was completing high school through another program along with a group of friends.

I had enjoyed accompanying Alicia to many of her activities during the summer of 2013. I wanted to learn what sustained Alicia's unwavering desire to see Plaza Comunitaria's mission fulfilled. To accomplish her vision, she worked diligently in the various tasks she had set for herself. She always was walking up and down the four corners of Agua Clara, always onto the next project. The following summer, 2014, sitting down in the wooden table where

we shared many meals and conversations, I had more questions. I wanted to inquire about her history before Plaza Comunitaria. Who influenced her? How did she get there? What were her formative influences? I, however, could not ask a question that could prompt her answer those questions. I managed to open the interview by asking: What was your first contact with Plaza Comunitaria? Alicia went back into her memories, and gave me a window right at a genesis moment:

Entonces una compañera,
que estaba en ese lugar dando asesorías,
me mostró cómo se daban
y qué es lo que hacían.

¡Y me gustó!

Y empecé a ayudarla con algunos educandos
que no podían entender su libro,
querían aprender.

Y fue allí como que me gustó más la idea
de poder enseñar
de poder ayudar a gente que lo requiere.

After reflecting on Alicia's words I translated them as follows:

Then a *compañera*,
who was there tutoring,
showed me how to do it
and what is the work that they did.

And I loved it!

And I started helping her out with some students,
who could not understand their books.

They wanted to learn.

And it was there that I loved the idea
of being able to teach,
of being able to help people who need it.

The events and experiences described in the lines above happened when she was thirteen years old. At that age, Alicia wanted to continue going to school after elementary school was not old enough to enroll in an adult education program; and too old for continuing with elementary education. "Quería yo seguir estudiando mi secundaria y no lo pude hacer y fui a las instalaciones para preguntar si yo podía seguir estudiando," Alicia recalled. Determination came across very clearly in those words, a trait in Alicia I had come to be familiar with.

Alicia walked to her local Plaza Comunitaria, then established as a *punto de encuentro*. In the terminology of National Institute of Adult Education, is a space created when a village has some people interested in enrolling Plaza Comunitaria, but not enough students to establish a full Plaza Comunitaria program. "Y me dijeron que no." Alicia tells me that upon arriving at *punto de encuentro* to inquire about the program she was told she couldn't be part of it.

Alicia was trapped. She was not able to return to school due to family financial constraints, and was not able to join the *Plaza Comunitaria* program meant for youth 15 years and older. Such was Alicia conundrum. Attending school was not option available to her at this point. "Then a *compañera* who was there tutoring," added Alicia, hinting at a turning point. Alicia's *compañera* did not take regulations too seriously. She created an apprenticeship opportunity for Alicia. The background of the first stanza describes the space where Alicia was initiated in the work of Plaza Comunitaria. She first tagged along, then

acted as support in tutoring sessions; later she tutored students herself.

Alicia's narrative delineated the elements of that apprenticeship as her words expressed "she showed me how to do it and what is the work that they did." Learning about Alicia's first encounter with Plaza Comunitaria shed a new light onto the Plaza Comunitaria books I had seen on Alicia's bookshelves. I now looked at those thinking that Alicia had not studied them on her own, but with other people. She first read them as she was helping others read.

In those early experiences as a teenager, Alicia learned quickly the people who would come to adult education program, the curriculum, how the program works, and how students move through the coursework. She learned about the challenges that students face in Plaza Comunitaria. "I played a role [in *punto de encuentro*] even when I was not supposed," Alicia explained. Alicia continues carrying the same message to adults who think they can't do it, it is too late, or there is nothing for them. Her *compañera* who was there tutoring certainly made the right decision. It was a generous act. It was generative. It was formative.

The second stanza is "and I loved it!" I remember how Alicia enjoyed every moment. She talked about the joy of seeing students graduate. I would witness this multiple times. One day, as we make our way through the humid weather, Alicia walked steadily towards the first house, and told me some stories about the people we will be visiting on that morning. Some are people she has been inviting for a long time, and they finally have accepted her invitation to join Plaza Comunitaria, some of them are old students who are finishing up their program.

When we arrived at the house Alicia called. I set aside the bicycle I was then using to go around town. Alicia announced to him that she was delivering his documents. He smiled, and Alicia proceeded to deliver his certificate and congratulate him. I pulled out my phone and snapped a picture of Alicia. She stands next to the man who has finished Plaza Comunitaria program. Alicia posed with pride and happiness. "Una satisfacción que no

cambiaría por nada," she later told me.

In the third stanza, I see another quality that became evident in Alicia's work. I picture Alicia seeing students wanting to read. For Alicia the printed word is not an individual effort, it is always connected to other people. She looks at her Plaza Comunitaria books and she thinks of stories of students who succeeded. She looks at her high school books and then she talks about her compañeras who struggle with her in completing it. The printed word is shared and lived with other people. Books are connections between people.

In the fourth stanza I can see an Alicia that is always attentive to the need. She remained true to this even to this day. Her inspiration came from seeing adult students' needs. On those same walks, Alicia would give me some background information on the people we were visiting: "I have been inviting this person for a long time, and I think she is going to finally join," Alicia expressed. At a different time, she learned from a local teacher that a young teenager had dropped school. "She is very smart," Alicia told me the day we delivered her graduation certificate.

As Alicia had explained, her involvement in Plaza Comunitaria became possible through *compañerismo*. From the very beginning Alicia saw Plaza Comunitaria as an opportunity to help. She used her elementary education to the service of the community. Alicia continued her participation with Plaza Comunitaria without being formally enrolled. In those early experiences Alicia started outlining her pedagogical perspectives. In her perspective tutoring, teaching or leading Plaza Comunitaria is about *compañerismo*. It is about meeting people where they are. It is a pedagogical encounter. Later in that interview Alicia continued describing her work to me. She reflected on what becomes possible through this work she cannot contain her tears.

Leading

One year passed until I was able to return to Agua Clara. Alicia and Roberto hosted

me again. Alicia's husband, Roberto, welcomed me into their house this time. He had set aside his sewing machine. At that time he had stopped working manufacturing handbags and backpacks. He took me to his backyard and showed me with excitement the new tools he was using to set up a vegetable garden. He had cleared the backyard, and prepared the soil for it.

At the time, he also repaired sewing machines on call, sold pastries and baguettes from a local baker every evening, and helped Alicia at the Plaza Comunitaria. Roberto was a tinkerer. He was very proud of a sound system he had repaired. Roberto took it from a friend who was about to throw it away. "If you can repair it, it is yours," said Roberto's friend. Roberto had acquired his new cellphone the same way.

I always saw Alicia as a tinkerer as well. She was always figuring something out at Plaza Comunitaria. Both had maintained their curiosity and attentiveness alive. When Alicia had to drop out of school, she started working to support her parents, later married Roberto. She first hesitated to continue her studies because life had changed for her. Later she took a chance and enrolled Plaza Comunitaria. Because of her experiences working, she was able to get half of the study modules waived. She finished middle school through Plaza Comunitaria when she was 23 years old.

Later, another person starting a *punto de encuentro*, the first organizational step before a full-fledged Plaza Comunitaria can officially operate. The person who starts a *punto de encuentro* invited Alicia to be one of the *asesores*. Alicia recalls that she studied more to get ready for her position as *asesora*:

Y allá empecé ya, a hacer mi función como asesora, pero no me quedé solamente con el conocimiento que obtuve en cuanto a los módulos que me daban de secundaria, tuve que investigar un poco más, estudiar un poco más, y ya, estén, introducirme más en otros libros y me gustaba hacer eso, como que investigar más sobre los temas que trataban los libros.

There [meeting point] I already started to work as a tutor. I did not rely solely on the knowledge I gained when I studied the middle school modules. I had to research more, study more, and so, get immersed in other books, and I enjoyed doing all of that, to do more research on the topics the book addressed.

Alicia was hooked. Alicia expressed her sense of responsibility as tutor. She kept learning, and improving. She wanted to be able to explain those topics she had already studied. She prepared herself for the task. She soon was reading more, and collecting other resources for her task. As Alicia put it, "I enjoyed doing all of that."

Alicia became an *asesora* of a *punto de encuentro*. During that time, a Plaza Comunitaria opened with some local staff working there. Later when the local coordinator [promotor/a] left the position Alicia was invited to be a *promotora*. Since Alicia had completed her middle school through Plaza Comunitaria, worked as an *asesora*, and knew the how a Plaza operated, she was the perfect fit. Among her daily responsibilities she goes around town inviting people to join Plaza Comunitaria, manages the paperwork for students, coordinates *asesores*, matches *asesores* with different students, organizes local campaigns to talk about the work of *la Plaza*, organizes other Plaza Comunitaria events, and attends Town Hall meetings.

One of the days I saw her deliver a certificate. Alicia told me that she had met her just when this student had dropped out of school. She proceeded to explain how she visits local public schools to request a roster of students who dropped out. That list then becomes a visit list. She schedules her time to tell those students about *La Plaza*. While staying in Agua Clara, I witnessed Alicia's unwavering commitment to the work of Plaza Comunitaria. She lived a busy life, not even mentioning her life as a wife, a friend, and a leader at her local church. Alicia never hesitated to share her vision, "in the village 2000 people have not finished their primary education" she shared this conveying a sense of urgency.

She is appreciative of *figuras solidarias* who work with her towards that goal. Alicia expressed, "I have great admiration for *figuras solidarias*. In spite of being housewives with children, spouse, family, and sometimes with a job, they help out as tutors. They devote time to help out people." Alicia considers giving up while working toward her goals:

Es que el trabajo si es un poco cansado... lo has trabajado por mucho tiempo y a veces el apoyo ves que no llega o cuando lo requieres de alguien, como que dices ya lo voy a dejar, pero pues al final de cuentas, la satisfacción también que te queda de ver a los educandos que concluyen o que alcanzan alguna meta o su propósito cuando entran a estudiar allá te motiva a seguir, entonces es muy difícil decir si continuamos o tiramos la toalla.

Work is demanding...you have worked for it so long, and sometimes financial support [from the INEA] does not arrive when you really need it to pay off someone.

[referring to small compensations for tutors]. Then you tell yourself: I am just going to give this up. In the end, you realize, that satisfaction comes when you see students who finish, or reach a goal or an objective they had when they started their studies [at Plaza Comunitaria]. That is when you get motivated to continue; it is then hard to tell if one will continue or give up.

"The financial support does not arrive on time," Alicia explains with some impatience in her voice. Alicia explains that is the satisfaction of seeing learners accomplishing their goals. It prevents her from throwing in the towel. Alicia's constant activity does not stop her from reflecting on villagers' circumstances. It is almost as if she has two codes of speaking. The first one is a fast paced, high pitched voice that conveys how indignant she feels at how the administration fails to understand the needs of Agua Clara people. In contrast, as soon as she starts talking about the community her face relaxes. She tells me about life circumstances of life of various Plaza Comunitaria students in a soft tone of voice. It is a person who can

feel how hard it is to enroll Plaza Comunitaria. Alicia positions her work at the crossroads of important decisions for adults.

At some point during their lives, when they [adults] face the consequences of all of this [not going to school], they rethink their situation and decide to go back to school. It means a lot [to them] the fact that you are there to tell them ‘I’ll support you.’

That made me think about the many conversations and interviews with community members who would be shy about admitting they were attending Plaza Comunitaria. How did they get convinced to enroll in Plaza Comunitaria then? Community members continually referenced Alicia’s tenacious invitation. Alicia talked about demonstrations of appreciation from students through small gifts (e.g., fruits, or popsicles):

A satisfaction I would change for nothing, is the fact that they perceive and respect you as a teacher. An experience I lived on teachers’ day is that people came to me to wish me a happy teachers’ day. They did so in spite of the fact that I am not a teacher. It was unexpected. As they were greeting me some mentioned: even if you are not a teacher, you assume the role of a teacher.

This work is intrinsically rewarding for Alicia. The fact that Alicia does not have a degree in education, or works within a non-formal system of education has no bearing in the perception of the community. Later, in the interview she explained that she sees community recognition as a sign that she has made a real contribution for the betterment of people’s lives. Through her work in Plaza Comunitaria, Alicia assumed leadership roles in the community. She is recognized as a teacher in the community. As I recorded the interview I could also notice Alicia’s excitement while talking about her job, for the people who study in Plaza Comunitaria. I finished the interview with no doubt that Alicia felt fulfillment in her work Plaza Comunitaria *promotora*.

Alicia’s work in the community does not go without any conflict. Alicia discussed

conflicts she had with her mother-in-law. "She does not understand why I do what I do. She argues that in her generation women would accept their husband's' wealth. If they happened to be wealthy women would enjoy it. If their husbands happened to be poor then they would have to accept it," Alicia tells me while showing a confused face. "Both partners need to earn money to make a living," is Alicia's response. She rejects the implication that as a women she has to stay at home and accept her fate. She concludes saying that many people hold on to very old-fashioned views about the roles of women.

Summer 2015

Alicia and Roberto were not in their house when I arrived. The walls of the house were finished and painted. The unfinished room, which I had become used to seeing, was up and running. "The guest room is finished," I thought to myself recalling what she told me about that room the first time I met her. The house and bathroom had running water. Roberto continued to grow vegetables in his backyard. The *triciclo*, Roberto's means of transportation in the village, had become a *mototaxi*. Roberto had some extra income.

I was not surprised to learn a few hours later that Alicia had guests. After two summers being hosted by them I had assumed I could stay there. I had no place to stay, but I was not frazzled. The joy of seeing familiar faces overthrew the need to make immediate lodging arrangements. Instead, Alicia and I walked around the village under the scorching Yucatán summer heat.

She texted our common friends Vero and Tomasita telling them, "Someone wants to see you, guess who is here." I suggested we buy some *paletas* [popsicles] to share with Vero and Tomasita. Alicia agreed. We walked uphill three blocks from the Town Hall to the *paleteria* [popsicle store] next to the Catholic Church. We slowly found our way. I say slowly because the humid 90F degrees weather made me feel it was a longer walk than it was.

In that short walk, I learned many circumstances had changed for Alicia. She no

longer was Plaza Comunitaria *promotora*. I had spent the last two years reflecting on her words, reflections, and insights as the local person directing this program. I had seen the work that she had done, and her vision. I did not want her to leave Plaza Comunitaria. Nevertheless, Alicia was always up to new endeavors and reaching her goals. Alicia was always *saliendo adelante*.



Figure 4. Roberto and Alicia triciclo



Figure 5. Alicia delivering a certificate

Reflections on Alicia's Education Through the lens of Ortega y Gasset's Philosophy

When I rendered Alicia's description of her early contact with Plaza Comunitaria into poetic form, I realized that it reflected an important formative moment in Alicia's life. I am intentionally using the word formative because of its connotations. It makes me think of the word in Spanish. In a literal sense *formativo* would refer to the action of giving shape.

Formativo frequently appears in academic contexts in México to describe complex paradigmatic processes of preparation. I see as an example of it *formacion de maestros* to describe teacher education. The poem I shared about Alicia's formative moment outlined the shape of the pedagogies that I would later see her enact those summers in Plaza Comunitaria.

In that conversation, Alicia first described her formative experiences, in so doing she explained the foundations of her educational philosophy. By telling her story she was providing the rationale for educational efforts. In Plaza Comunitaria maintained this same ethos. Her invitation to people in the community was broad and open. People were

encouraged to join Plaza Comunitaria because they all have the intelligence. They can do it because they want. And she always tried to persuade them to want it. She always aimed at creating an environment without fear.

This is the setting I use to understand the Orteguian idea of life as drama and Alicia's emergence as educational community leader. I read her actions in the Orteguian sense of seeing beyond the *mundo patente* into the *transmundos* through the lens of *razón vital*. I echo Gasset's idea that a pure rationalistic system can deprive us from a having a vital experience of life and, in this case a vital understanding of the education of adults. Reading Plaza Comunitaria with Ortega helped me appreciate what this community leader did to bring life.

Literal/Biographical	Describing her formative experiences
Pedagogical	Educational philosophy
Narrative	Life as drama (for Alicia, Plaza Comunitaria is a microcosm of how she writes the novel of her life)

Table 5. Interpreting Alicia's story

I now pose the question: What do I learn as an educator? I can outline some lessons that emerge very clearly from Alicia's narrative. First, Alicia shows that to study is to be in community. I saw this through her early experiences as well her most recent ones. Second, Alicia demonstrated a commitment to intellectual equality of all students. Third, she was very determined about actively tackling systemic issues through her work. Finally Alicia, took every opportunity dismantle the belief that students are lazy. In the following paragraphs I expand on the meaning of those lessons for me.

As an educator I learn from Alicia that to study is to be in community. That the printed word or that the concepts that stem out of the school curriculum can to be "processed" in community. Learning can be an experience of awareness of those who surround us. As an educator I can grow in being attentive and sensible. In Alicia's study group laughter and food became important ways to build community. I don't take this to mean that every classroom I

lead or participate in should have laughter and food. I means to me that every classroom can be attentive to what are the elements that build bridges between the concepts studied, the students, and their communities.

Alicia's generosity guided her action. Alicia's generosity and hospitality, that I experienced first hand permeated her action. Alicia led out of sheer desire to share. That is also reflected on how she invites students to join Plaza Comunitaria. Alicia brought her ethics into her role as Plaza Comunitaria local coordinator. Her ethics is one of *solidaridad*. In Alicia I see studying, not conceptualized as an individual effort, instead I see Alicia learning by helping others read. She investigated more about the topics she had already learned because she had started a role as an *asesora*. Then, I witnessed Alicia study her *preparatoria* in the company of her friends laughing about their mishaps and confusions, and taking on difficult concepts together.

In Alicia I see a commitment to equality. Alicia is aware of her own circumstances growing up, and wonders about the circumstances of community members. She sees possibilities for everybody. To mothers, she tells them "it is never too late, you can learn with children." To students who dropped of school she tells them that they can still finish their school. To workers, she tells them Plaza Comunitaria will help them in the demands of their day to jobs. Often times talking to community members I would hear Alicia's name many times. They often referred to her as an influence in enrolling Plaza Comunitaria.

I learn from Alicia that as an educator I need to enhance my sensibilities as an educator by paying attention to possibility. She never assumed that what she considered important about enrolling Plaza Comunitaria was equally important to everybody in the village. She made efforts to reach out to all based on their own circumstances. As an educator I want to think that perhaps students do not see these concepts in the same way I do. Perhaps they do not see the same implications. What are the possibilities for them? How can I think in

dialogue with my students? How can I present specific possibilities for each student?

Thinking about possibilities in Alicia's pedagogy did not mean promoting the idea that we will solve every problem with education. Alicia had a good sense that education alone is not a panacea. She taught me that as I saw her passion talking about other programs that Plaza Comunitaria students could access. Alicia did not go to school to learn about structural inequalities, she experienced them. She talked about those experiences with me. Even though she wanted to, there was no chance to go to school. She did not paint a Cinderella story expecting people should make it on their own. She sought opportunities to connect Plaza Comunitaria to other programs that addressed those inequalities she experienced.

As an educator, do I see myself ignoring the effects of structural inequalities? Do I go by Cinderella narratives? Alicia teaches me that I can find opportunities to develop partnership with other groups, systems, or organizations etc, that help address larger societal issues. Alicia knows by first hand experience that when structural inequalities are tackled students can focus on studying. Alicia stays in my memory as a good reminder, in case I want to forget that are issues beyond school systems.

Alicia is very impatient with the belief that students or community members are lazy. To an outsider, it would easy to reach such conclusion. A random visit to Agua Clara feels as though life is slow-paced. There is not much visible activity on any given day. It takes time to realize that youth commute to work every morning, others work in their houses sewing handbags and backpacks, other people keep their businesses up and running, and children are at school. The business of Agua Clara escapes easily from casual observation. Alicia's life serves a good evidence of that pace. Alicia moves between her study group, the responsibilities of her position, family life, and church responsibilities.

In relation to Alicia I learn to take time to learn about students, and their situations. She teaches me to look beyond what is apparent. I learn with Alicia's pedagogy to especially

not label students as lazy. She challenged this false belief every time she could. As an educator I need to take my chances to challenge beliefs that position students as deficient.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Voice of Resistance: Learning in Exclusion

Tomasita's Story

Tomasita's story is a heart-gripping portrayal of exclusion in the state of Yucatán: exclusion that occurs at many levels: linguistic, social, political, and economical (Bracamonte & Lizama, 2003). At the same time Tomasita's voice is one of joy and resistance. In Tomasita's narrative voice I ask: What are Tomasita's circumstances of exclusion? How does she resist marginalization? How does Tomasita reframe her life experiences? How does Tomasita help us confront racism? In this story we can confront linguistic marginalization, and learn how Tomasita responds to her circumstances and transforms them.

Vida Entre las Plantas

I had just set up the recorder on the old wooden table along with two sheets of interview questions when Tomasita walked into the Plaza Comunitaria classroom rushed, and expressing confusion in her face said, "*Maestro*, what are you going to ask? Do you really need this?" "Nothing to worry about," I replied while her friends teased her that my questions were going to be on her next exam. She looked at her *compañeras* and chuckled with her characteristic joviality.

I was well aware she had paused her *quehaceres* (to-do list) for a moment. Her fast-paced speech enhanced my sense that she soon would go back to them. Mindful of her time, I started recording. I explained that I had prepared a set of questions to inquire about her experiences studying in Plaza Comunitaria, and perhaps talk about topics beyond Plaza Comunitaria. Tomasita expressed with eloquence what interrupted schooling meant to her. Her vivid description of those memories took me by surprise:

Ya no seguí la secundaria.

Hace mucho tiempo:

Yo viví en ese rancho;
pues allá muchos trabajos hacía,
en eso de las pencas.

Nosotros íbamos a escorar las pencas,
y lo cargábamos.

Estábamos chicas.

Nos enseñaron a desyerbar,
a desgranar.

Nos pagaban, en eso, cincuenta centavos.

Y desgranábamos por almudes.

Y así se nos pagaba.

Y desde chicas nos enseñaron a tener nuestro dinero.

Muchos tipos de trabajo hicimos:

lo de la penca,
desgranábamos,
desyerbábamos,
íbamos a llevar los ganados al monte.

I translated her words as follows:

I did not go to middle school.

Long time ago:

I lived in that farm;

where many sorts of jobs I did,

we worked with henequen leaves.

We used to go to the farm to line the henequen leaves up,

and carry them on our shoulders.

We were little girls.

They taught us we had to weed our farm,

and scrape the kernels off the corn cobs.

Back then, we made, 50 cents.

We were little girls.

We scraped the grain off by *almudes*.

That is how we knew how much we would make.

As little girls we learned we had to earn our money.

Many sorts of jobs we did:

henequen leaves,

scraping off maize kernels,

weeding,

and feeding the cattle into the woods.

In these lines, Tomasita shared her first schooling experience. I titled this poem as

Vida Entre las Plantas because it evoked a lush tapestry of plants in the surroundings of Tomasita as her childhood unfolded in the day-to-day work of a Mexican farm. The poem opens with a reference to her middle school, mandatory level for all children in México. *La secundaria*, an educational experience many children take for granted, in this poem *la secundaria* features briefly. I see this as symbolic of how distant the *secundaria* schooling experience was in Tomasita's life. This poem is resolutely about early educational experiences.

The poem depicts her experiences outside of school as educational experiences. Her life started as a life of hard work. Even to this day her life remains a life of hard work. She recalls her experiences working *en eso de las pencas*. Chopping down the henequen plant leaves as a child, lining them up, and carrying them over her shoulders all the way to the farm. As she spoke I thought to myself that henequen plants are thorny and that she had to be careful carrying them out. Henequen once provided Yucatecans with the raw materials to create textiles used in daily life (i.e. hammocks, and ropes) Later, the economy of state of Yucatán would thrive through business with henequen processing.

Along with the work of *las pencas*, Tomasita also learned to prepare the land for sowing and harvesting. Two verbs show her participation in this cycle of land preparation and harvesting: *Desyerbábamos y desgranábamos*. The verb tenses convey a sense of nostalgia. They describe actions that happened continually in the past. Tomasita snaps two pictures of the cycle of farming life. As children, they would work uprooting weeds from the soil, and scraping the kernels off corn cobs. Tomasita's imagery has far removed us, as readers, from *la secundaria*, teachers, and textbooks. Tomasita has taken us into her early life in the farm, out in the woods, henequen plants, weeds in the soil, leaves of grass, and corn plants. It is a life of work. Fifty cents were paid for that hard work.

The sentence *desgranar por almudes* registers, to someone distant from the rural life,

as an archaic expression, particularly the word *almud*. Perhaps found in history books, literary writings, or the Reina-Valera version of the Bible in Spanish. It is a unit of measurement that remains in the rural vocabulary of México as a heritage from the Arabic language. Tomasita calculated the amount of corn kernels she gathered using *almudes* as a unit of measure. Based on the number of *almudes* she could estimate how much money she would make. She earned her money, and learned *desde chica* the ethos of having money. *Nos enseñaron a tener nuestro dinero*. The verb *tener* in this context implies not only having money but also the process of earning it and the stewardship of it. It is a statement that money must be earned with hard work, and once you have it, it is important to take care of it.

Tomasita's poem closes by reminding us the types of work she did as a little girl. It is a series of actions in some distant past: *Hicimos, desgranábamos, desyerbábamos*. She then offers one last depiction of her life rhythm as a little girl: leading the cattle into the dense jungle to feed them. Even to this day, her life continues enumerating *many sorts of jobs*. Tomasita gets up early every day. She travels to Mérida, the capital of the State of Yucatán, where she cleans houses and apartments. The summer I met her, she also she would also get up very early to sweep the streets of Agua Clara dutifully at 5:00 in the morning, at that time she was hired on a non-contractual basis by the Agua Clara Town Hall.

She takes great pride her cooking skills, integral to her hospitality. Tomasita also prepares some deep-fried pastries (*buñuelos*) she sells in town as per request and works at a local restaurant located in the main plaza that serves hamburgers during night weekends when villagers hang out at the village's center. Tomasita continued demonstrating such qualities working day and night all types of jobs, in the village and in Mérida. Although she does not live with plants anymore, I continue to see the same personal character that she forged living with *las plantas*.

Silence

Tomasita often sits at the table of her kitchen-dinning room. She converses *animadamente* with one of her sisters in Mayan, while her sons stick around her. They can be cooking or eating together or just sitting. There are always conversations going on at her table. Tomasita enjoyed the fellowship time with the sister that visited regularly. Tomasita does not hide the fact she is a native speaker of Maya. “*Soy mayera*, ” she says referring to herself. I particularly enjoy that expression because it merges the phrase “speaker of Maya,” in one word: “*mayera*. ” There is no separation between the speaker and the language. The speaker and her mother tongue are one. Such stance is no small achievement given the history of marginalization of indigenous Mexicans. After Tomasita’s masterful description of her early life as a little girl, she shared another heart-gripping experience. She recalled her feelings of exclusion while traveling to the capital of the state of Yucatán: Mérida.

Mis hermanas y yo,

en Maya hablamos,

pura Maya,

no español.

Entonces nos oían hablar,

y se reían de nosotras.

-¿Ya viste cómo está hablando esa india?

¡Y me incomodaba!

Cuando estábamos... yo con ella,

pues procurábamos no platicar.

Cuando teníamos a lado una persona en la combi,

allá no platicábamos.

O así en voz baja hablábamos,

para que no nos digan cosas...

I translate as follows:

My sisters and I,

 speak in Mayan,

 Mayan only,

 No Spanish.

Then, they heard us talk,

 They laughed at us.

 - “¿Ya viste cómo está hablando esa india?”

It made me very uncomfortable.

When my sister and I were together,

 we made every effort not to talk.

If someone was sitting next to us in the bus,

 we would not talk.

 If we did,

 we would talk softly,

 so they don't mock us...

The background of the first stanza is conversation. Through her opening lines she presents the main characters of her story. *Mis hermanas y yo*. She continues by describing

with precision her relationship with her mother tongue: *en Maya hablamos, pura Maya*. The word *pura* in this sense does not translate as pure, as in pure water. I translate it as always. However, some connotations from that first meaning of pure transfer into the conversations she mentions: a conversation 100 percent in Mayan, unadulterated by Spanish. This is Tomasita's way of stating this is our mother tongue, this is the language with which we are most comfortable, and it is how we communicate as a family. Spanish is not part of it.

In the second stanza Tomasita recalls experiences traveling to Mérida. People all over the state of Yucatán commute often to the urban centers of the Yucatán Peninsula for work, conducting business, shopping, to go to school, leisure, and a variety of other activities. Given this context I expected she would also have had some experience traveling to Mérida on a regular basis. I also knew she had a job cleaning an apartment there. Tomasita remembered sitting in old Volkswagen Vanagon, common transportation to and from villages, while talking to her sister on her way to Mérida.

I want to add that speaking indigenous languages in public spaces is not a common occurrence. Tomasita's short sentences in the first stanza build up towards a more emotional moment. The longer sentence in this stanza portrays the complicating event of the plot. Tomasita sets up her narrative to describe reactions she and her sister would encounter: "So when people heard us talk, they would laugh at us." Then, her intonation mimicked people from Mérida talking about them: "*¿Escuchaste a esa india hablar?*" [*Did you hear that indigenous woman speaking?*]. Tomasita recalls almost recreating the vicious and shaming tone. Her following words complement the feelings that emerge in this recollection: - *it made me so uncomfortable!* This event remained ingrained in Tomasita's memories. This stanza contrasts with the first in that a process of silencing starts. Those happy conversations with her sister encounter reactions from people around her.

Tomasita and her sister experience traveling to Mérida as a down spiraling experience

of censorship and self-silencing: “When my sister and I were together, we made every effort not to talk. If we did we would talk very quietly so they don’t mock us.” In the first line of the stanza, Tomasita goes back to that image of being with her sister (*cuando estabámos*). That moment of fellowship with her sister gets interrupted with the feeling of being judged because of the language they speak. The word *procurábamos* expresses a deliberate effort to not talking, to not saying anything in front of others. A conscious effort of self-silencing.

The main ideas of every stanza center around the words “speak” and “talk.” Every stanza amplifies the meaning of the previous one. Her words also flow from cheerful conversations at home (first stanza) to being shamed because of how they speak outside of home (second stanza) to a gradual silencing (third and fourth stanzas). As one reader of this poem put it: I feel that in this poem the word *talk* becomes a dirty word, strongly associated with shame. The experience of being different, of fearing, of being cautious led to an eventual process of silencing. Tomasita expresses her feelings of this process succinctly and poignantly. The poem *Silence* introduces the reader to Tomasita’s life at the margins. An experience of closed dialogues, where no one gets to have a conversation. Nobody speaks.

To read this poem following Tomasita's experience is debilitating. The poem emerged in the context of Tomasita described how in the past she perceived herself as ignorant. *La palabra ignorante me dolía*, she said almost hinting at a new perspective on that word. It is the reason I decided to end this poem with an ellipsis. While this poem captures the silencing process Tomasita, she does not end it this conversation with pain. She positions the poem in a distant past that only explains why she cemented the conviction that her knowledge is worth. “If they call me *india*, I think I would challenge them back, I am very proud of knowing Maya,” Tomasita concluded with a tone of victory. Tomasita’s *voz cotidiana* shed a new light into my understanding of living life in another language where that language is not welcomed.

Exclusion

Tomasita spoke openly about her experiences of exclusion. “Pero le digo me crié en un pueblo soy de esas personas que, soy muy explosiva. Y como tenía yo mucha ignorancia.” [I am telling you, I was brought up in a village. I am one of those people who is very explosive. I was very ignorant]. In that statement Tomasita presents the dimensions of exclusion in her life. In her experiences, there is a geographic dimension (I was brought up in a village) of exclusion, a social dimension (I am an explosive woman), and school knowledge dimension (I was very ignorant).

I was very puzzled when Tomasita described herself as being an explosive woman in the past. Tomasita, explained that she used to curse (*mal hablada*), and that cursing was her manner of being explosive. I became even more puzzled. She seemed to describe explosive and cursing as fixed traits of her personality independently from her circumstances. It was not until later that she contextualized those responses through her experiences commuting to the capital of state, and being shamed because of her language. Tomasita never hesitated to talk about those memories: “When people heard me talk, and laughed about me, I would turn around and curse at them in Mayan.” It was then that I came to understand such explosiveness as a reaction to express her frustration when people laughed her for speaking Mayan.

The word “explosion” captures her response to such shaming, and mocking. Her response to that process of silencing in public spaces. I remained pensive absorbing the weight of Tomasita’s experience. “Not anymore,” Tomasita expressed with relief. “I am proud of knowing Mayan. I used to be ashamed. Not anymore. *Bendito sea Dios.*” Tomasita continues speaking of Plaza Comunitaria illustrating those same dimensions of her experience of exclusion. This time she talks about it in terms of her current circumstances. She starts sharing her new perspectives. Tomasita refers to Plaza Comunitaria as both a

geographic/physical space and relational space. Finally, it was a place where doors to school knowledge opened:

Y hasta la palabra ignorancia me dolía, porque era una palabra que no entendía todavía y [en] la Plaza Comunitaria he aprendido muchísimas cosas. Me ha abierto las puertas, el estudio, en muchas cosas. La Plaza Comunitaria me ha ayudado mucho.

Even the word ignorance used to hurt because I did not understand that word yet. In Plaza Comunitaria I have learned a lot of things. It has opened the doors, to studying and many more. Plaza Comunitaria has been very helpful to me.

Opening those doors I can picture her dear *compañeras* Alicia and Vero cheering for Tomasita. Her stream of thoughts touched on the notion of *ignorancia* several times. She now contrasts *ignorancia* to her experiences being part of Plaza Comunitaria as space where she can freely engage with ideas. The meanings conveyed in her use of the word *ignorancia* change subtly. *Ignorancia* is no longer described as a fixed trait (*tenía ignorancia*), but as she reads more she realizes we always ignore many things; it is the inevitable consequence of constantly learning.

Ignoro muchas cosas, que ahorita que estoy en Prepa pues. Pero la Plaza Comunitaria me ha ayudado muchísimo, porque de antes cuando entré no sabía nada, muchos conceptos no sabía, he aprendido, vengo a la Plaza y veo que hay unos, ya ve que tienen sus cartelones allí pegados, leo en eso y hay algunos que me gustan.

I ignore a lot of things even now that I am in High School. But Plaza Comunitaria has definitely helped me a lot. Long time ago when I first started I did not know anything. There are many concepts I did not know, [and that] I have learned. I come to La Plaza, as you have noticed there are posters hanging on the wall. I read them, and some of them I really like.

Tomasita presents knowledge not as something to be solved by adding more

knowledge through schooling (“I ignore a lot of things even now that I am in High School”) rather as an experience that takes place in a space where she can engage with ideas.

Trust

“In Plaza Comunitaria I have learned a lot of things. It has opened the doors to studying, and many more. Plaza Comunitaria has been very helpful to me,” Tomasita tells me with certain tenderness in her voice. Before Plaza Comunitaria she knew no specific place that served as a school. There was no school building in the farm where Tomasita grew up. Teachers visited her farm and taught children there how to read and write. They would improvise their classrooms in any space available. Tomasita, like many of her *compañeras*, dropped out of school after completing her elementary school level. By participating in Plaza Comunitaria, Tomasita also experienced many of the rituals that go along with schooling. For instance, graduation ceremonies. In one of those, Tomasita would receive more encouragement. Tomasita expressed how Alicia’s deep trust in her intelligence inspired her:

Yo no tenía mucha fe de que podía yo estudiar, digo no voy a [estudiar], y doña Lety me decía, venía cuando se hacían los eventos, cuando estaba yo estudiando cuando se hacían los eventos se daban sus certificados y si me emocionaba verlos. Sí puede- doña Alicia me decía- sí puede. Si ellos pudieron porque usted no.

I did not have much faith that I could study. I said [to myself] I won’t go. During the graduation ceremony events I attended while I was still a student. I would be very touched seeing [students graduate]. Yes, you can do it- doña Alicia would tell me- yes, you can do it. If they could do it, why can’t you do it?

Alicia understood well that graduation ceremonies as important events that excite adult students and their families about the possibilities. Alicia would not miss a chance to make sure students know she trusts in their intelligence to go through the program. She seized the opportunity to assure Tomasita she will one day be part of that ceremony receiving her

diploma. These types of actions on the part of Alicia emerged from her deep trust on students intelligence of Plaza Comunitaria. It is an ethos that was also present in their *compañerismo* and *convivencia*. Tomasita left this graduation ceremony touched and ready to continue with her goals. Tomasita, as many of those *compañeras*, would continue studying together beyond Plaza Comunitaria to earn their high school diploma.

Veronica, another *compañera*, who was always with Tomasita and Alicia would summarize this ethos of *compañerismo*: “*el esfuerzo que hacemos es unánime.*” They act together, they carry the same goal in mind, and helping the other to achieve that goal is essential to those unanimous efforts. I was later invited to witness those efforts through their study group.

Grupo de Estudio

I walked up the hill where the building of Plaza Comunitaria was located. Tomasita, Alicia, Vero and her daughter had organized a study session. Alicia, Vero and Tomasita all had their own bundle of photocopies of the study guide for high school physics. Tomasita ask many questions. Sometimes a confused look accompanies her questions. When her *compañeras*, Alicia and Vero, keep discussing without her, she looks at both of them and they promptly help her catching up with the topic at hand. To them, stopping helping their peers had been an essential part of the process of learning. While one explains the topic to the other repeatedly they grow in their familiarity with the topic. Since the exam was approaching they decided to focus on the exercises. They reviewed the formulas, and what they meant, they looked at the charts, and discussed them. They spend the next couple of hours doing that. Such was their discipline once a week, on top of attending their classes twice a week.

Finding teachers and tutors had always been difficult to them, but it did not stop them. They drew from any network available to get people to help them. During those days, I

learned that they knew that the daughter of one their neighbors was studying chemistry in the University of Yucatán. And Alicia, Vero and Tomasita connected with her, and she became one of their teachers. The evening I tried to help them a bit through their physics session, I could not help but think about the countless obstacles they had to overcome. Obstacles that they used as an occasion to laugh. Laughing those obstacles off did not only relaxed them but cemented in their memories the importance of their achievements. They helped each other without hesitation. They collaborated with each other to understand any concepts. Leticia told me they sometimes stayed more than two hours. When they knew they will stay longer they ensured there is food for dinner.

Justice

After walking around Agua Clara's main plaza looking for popsicles, Alicia walked me to Tomasita's house. Her house is one block away from the Town Hall. The house resembles some of the houses in the old neighborhoods of Merida, a colorful, rectangle-shaped house with spacious living rooms and high ceilings. Tomasita texted Alicia letting her know that we were on our way to her house. We waited for some time outside her house.

When Tomasita arrived she welcomed us into her house with that characteristic jovial manner I had come to feel familiar with. "We brought some popsicles," I said. "Maestro - no se hubiera molestado," she replied. I opened the plastic bag and let Tomasita and Alicia pick their popsicles before the scorching heat of that day melted them away. "Maestro: you still remember I want to be a lawyer," Tomasita expressed in response to my first comment. After reading the transcription of my first interview to Tomasita in the summer of 2014, I never forgot she wanted to be a lawyer, so I had mentioned it to her. After our conversation on my first day back in Agua Clara I had learned that Tomasita's, Alicia's and Vero's enthusiasm for finishing their high school had not dissipated. My last summer in Agua Clara in 2015, I would learn more about Tomasita perspectives on local politics and insights on political

action. Days later, I was placing my recorder and some pieces of paper to interview Tomasita again. This time it happened on the table of her kitchen-dinning room. That day Tomasita returned to some of the topics she had shared before. She again took on the notion of *ignorancia*. This time, she used that word in connection to her desire to fight for justice.

Por eso yo peleo mucho por la justicia digo, ser justos y también que mis hijos me respeten y yo ser respetada porque pues creo que muchos años dejé que me falten al respeto pero porque yo lo permití, posiblemente también porque, por ignorancia, que no, si tenía claro lo que yo quería pero lo permití.

That is why I fight for justice, I say, also being just people. I want my sons to respect me, and be respected. I believe many years, I allowed people not to do so. Perhaps because, because ignorance. I was always very clear about what I wanted, but I let it happen.

Tomasita hints at a time when she would let people disrespect her. Even though she clearly knew what she wanted, she did not advocate for herself. That day she told me how much it meant that one of her teachers did for her study group. This teacher helped them apply to a program that was giving away computers to students in need. That teacher walked them through the process, helping them write a request letter, traveling twice to Mérida with them to submit their requests, and helping them navigate government bureaucracies. This is a process that built a new sense of traveling to Merida, not of staying quiet and speaking softly. It became a trip to make things happen to advocate for herself.

Tomasita explained more: “They [local politicians] know we are troublemakers [*revoltosas*], we would start a revolt and complain, we won't stay silent.” She continued with an assertive tone: “They know that if they don't do things right we will complain and they will get in trouble.” Those words seemed to speak back to the current political campaign happening that summer. Campaign advertisement colored many walls in town making many

promises: support to students, free internet. Another one read with capital letters: for the benefit of the population there will be a doctor on call, medicine, and hospital transportation. The last line in capital red letters read: Everything free.

Walking around town taking pictures of the campaign ads took me back to the words of Tomasita's English teacher: "You don't have to go say thanks to politicians for what they have done. All that money comes from us. It comes from our taxes. We are supporting them, so they are accountable to us." This campaign ads featured a dinosaur. It became the mascot for the campaign. An innocuous mascot to the casual observer that stops being innocuous when I take into consideration México's political history. Political opposition disparaged the PRI [Institutional Revolutionary Party] as an everlasting dynasty of rulers calling them "dinosaurs". This reference became part of the Mexican political imaginary with negative connotations. Tomasita did not like the fact the campaign spun the reference to dinosaurs to mean they had all the experience in governing, and thus needed to be brought back. Tomasita opposed this candidate.

Tomasita, Vero, and Alicia each shared about their times attending different events in Agua Clara Town Hall. The days I walked around the Town Hall, I quickly learned that youth would gather during evenings outside the Town Hall to catch a public Wi-Fi. It did not take long for me to bring my phone and do the same. One of those days while I waited the replies to my messages, I started thinking about this space as the site where Tomasita, Alicia and Vero came to advocate for themselves and their group needs, requests more support for Plaza Comunitaria, attend meetings with the major and present their complaints, a place of civic participation for them. Tomasita was happy that she and her friends had built a reputation of keeping leaders accountable.



Figure 6. Agua Clara Town Hall



Figure 7. Political ad promising free internet to students



Figure 8. Political ad promising on-call doctors for the community

Empezar y Terminar

In our multiple conversations, Tomasita not only responded to my questions; she was also speaking back to the multiple voices around her. Some of those voices were supportive, some not. Some of those voices were immediate voices, as when Alicia inspired Tomasita to finish her *secundaria* by telling her that one day she would walk on graduation day like the students graduating at that time. Those voices can be interpreted as resonances from a larger societal message that dictated her boundaries. Tomasita spoke passionately as if she was always responding to those voices. In the following Poem I can see those voices. Tomasita presented those voices in parallel:

Cuando empecé,

-Él me decía:

“¿Para qué lo sigues haciendo?

Eres muy ignorante,

de allá no vas a pasar,

no sé para qué lo estudias,

vas a seguir siendo lo mismo.”

-Mis hijos me decían:

“Usted ha dicho, mamá, que cuando se empieza algo,

se tiene que terminar.

Tiene que terminarlo mamá, por algo lo empezó.”

“Usted nos ha dicho que cuando se hace un compromiso

hay que terminarlo, sea cual sea el compromiso.”

Ellos han sido mi apoyo.

A veces a ellos no les gusta que yo vaya a la escuela.

Pero ellos me dicen así:

“¡No te preocupes mamá; el examen, lo va a pasar!

Usted ha dicho que lo que se empieza hay que terminarlo.”

Pero sí, gracias a Dios he aprendido muchas cosas.

I translated it as:

When I started,

- He used to tell me:

Why are you still doing this?

You are very ignorant,

You won't make it beyond that point,

I don't know why are studying that,

You will remain the same.

- My sons told me:

Mom- you have told us, that you start something,

you have to complete it.

You have to finish it, there is a reason you started it.

Mom- you have told us, that you make a commitment,

We have to finish it, no matter what the commitment is.

They have been my source of support.

Sometimes they don't like I go to school.

But they tell me the following:

Do not worry mother; you are going to pass the exam!

You have told us that you have to finish what you start.

Yes, thanks be to God, I have learned many things

Tomasita here interacts with two voices, and contrasts the words of those two voices. The voices are situated by her opening lines: *Cuando empecé*. She tells us that when she enrolled Plaza Comunitaria, the first voice was one of opposition. Somber words that delineated her boundaries. “You won’t make it beyond this point.” That point was the point of ignorance, understood as an abject categorization of a person. You are this, and you belong here. Do not move beyond this point. It came from someone close, someone familiar, and although it was familiar it also carried a larger societal message she had heard before. The last two lines of the first voice question the purpose of studying (*no sé para qué lo estudias*), and the hopelessness of the effort (*vas a seguir siendo lo mismo*). Those statements enclose a crude pronouncement.

At the moment I heard these words from Tomasita it was already clear that herself was a living statement against those crude words. She found purpose in every turn of her journey in Plaza Comunitaria learning with her *compañeras*. It was clear she had started a process of transformation. Tomasita is now the only person in her family to have completed middle school, and at time she uttered those words she was well on her way to finishing high school. Tomasita, Alicia and Vero continued studying high school through another non-formal system of education (*Preparatoria Abierta*).

The second set of voices came from her sons. They expressed more than encouragement. They framed her efforts within the ethics that she had taught them growing up. That is prefaced by the sentence: *usted nos ha dicho*. Tomasita’s son addressed his mom

as *usted*, a more formal way to speaking to adults or people in authority. They merged that respectful form of speaking with tenderness and encouragement. “There is a reason why you started this,” the sons tell her. Without expressing the purpose, they trust this makes sense for their mother. They bring up the code of ethics Tomasita had taught them. You made a commitment, you have to finish it.

“A veces a ellos no les gusta que yo vaya a la escuela,” Tomasita reflected on the consequences for her sons having a mother who goes to school. Later, she reasserted that her sons showered her with unwavering support. Her sons told her a third time: “when you start something you have to finish it.” The words of Tomasita’s sons allude to a constant reminder of support, exam after exam, page after page, and class after class. That is why she repeats her son's words of encouragement several times. It is a voice that is sustained, and keeps resonating. It casts a shadow on the first voice to the point until the reader forgets.

After walking me through how her sons encouraged her, Tomasita pauses for a moment: “Pero sí, gracias a Dios he aprendido muchas cosas.” Not too long after that Tomasita would fulfill her own dictum that her sons constantly reminded her: finish what you start. And when that happened, Alicia did not miss this opportunity to celebrate this milestone in Tomasita and Vero’s life. This time, I was not in the village seeing Alicia hand down diplomas, or listening to students at Plaza Comunitaria tell how Alicia was an welcoming voice of their efforts. By reading her words on social media I could still picture Alicia’s joy:

Comparto la gran felicidad de dos grandes amigas. Vero and Tomasita. Que demostraron que los sueños se pueden alcanzar con esfuerzo y dedicación . No en un programa especial de certificación. Ellas sí merecen nuestra admiración. Muchas felicidades a las dos.

I want to share the immense happiness of two of my great friends: Vero and Tomasita. Who worked tirelessly to achieve their dreams. This is not just a mere certification

program. They do deserve our admiration. Congratulations to the two of you!

Every sentence was packed with meaning. Behind those words there were hours working, laughing, helping each other, traveling to Mérida to take exams, and retaking failed exams. When Alicia shared her joy for such an accomplishment, she made clear that “this is not just a certification program.” By saying this she was highlighting that it was their high school diploma. Alicia’s picture on social media complemented her message. The setting was what looked like an office of the Ministry of Education. I reached that conclusion based on a picture of the governor of Yucatán hanging on the walls in the background. I could also distinguish the main features of their diploma: A colorful green piece of paper with seals, lists of subjects, grades, names of the granting organisms, with the pictures of students on it, and officials’ signatures. Tomasita and Vero held it with pride.



Figure 9. Vero and Tomasita holding their High School certificates

Figure 9 above depicts Vero and Tomasita holding their High School certificates. Alicia shared on social media of Tomasita and Vero’s graduation. From right to left. Tomasita and Vero holding their Preparatoria diplomas. I never met the other two people in the picture, who I think work for the Ministry of Education.

Tomasita's description of how she was raising up her two teenage boys seemed to continue what she had shared about her process of emancipation, a vision that challenges the circumstances in which she grew up. She expects to create a ripple effect so that the women around her sons are treated with respect and not as *esclavas de la casa*.

I want my sons to be independent, marry,
and treat their wives respectfully.

I teach them everything.

I teach them how to cook,
to do their laundry,
to clean the floors.

I teach them how to treat me with respect.

so when they marry,
they love their wives.

And they don't expect their wives to be their *esclavas*.

Pedagogy with Tomasita

Storying the educational experiences of Plaza Comunitaria women has a mirroring effect. Often crafting the stories and reading their words as poems made me look at myself. I have observed this effect on the readers of the poems as well contained in the stories. Often times they would make comments that evaluated their own circumstances. In this section, I will continue applying this effect. I write this section following this question: How do these stories guide my self-reflection as an educator?

Earlier I discussed my positionality growing up in the capital of the state. Tomasita opens our eyes to linguistic discrimination. Tomasita's story is an invitation to grapple with our own subtly racist practices, but also other more openly racist behaviors such as laughing at indigenous languages. But it also hints at other subtler behaviors that fall on the same category. When someone speaks in an indigenous language does it registers in our minds as funny, awkward, less-cultured? Do we take seriously their words? Even if we act respectful in front of them, do we make jokes after they are gone? Do we treat native speakers of English accent in Spanish differently from the accent in Spanish of an indigenous person? Are our day-to-day expressions filled with expressions that carry a colonial heritage (*eres un indio/india, se te sale lo indio*)? Do we pay lip-service to the importance of cultural and linguistic heritage but look down on indigenous people struggling in public spaces? Do we see indigenous people as explosive? Can we think in ways our behavior has prompted those reactions?

Tomasita struggled with the word *ignorancia* as a label attached to her. The word ignorance was thrown at her from all fronts. It had come from society, and even from her family. She felt assigned into this category over and over. She experienced pain in this category, and her story eventually breaks away from it. She redefined her relationship with that word. Tomasita concluded that we cannot know everything. We inevitable ignore

something. She focuses now on the discovery, and in her search for justice, and letting people disrespect her. If we think of the classroom, are we prone to put students in categories? Do we see them as in a curve? Some of them more capable than others? Some destined to fail no matter what we do? Can we create an environment like that of Plaza Comunitaria of radical acceptance? Do we consider that what students don't know as a hinder to discovery and search for common good?

Tomasita and many of her *compañeras* make us more aware of structural inequalities. She grew up in a family that could not afford to send all of the family members to school. In the time she grew up, the decision of who gets to attend school was clear. Men do often attend school. Women stay home. Can I look at students circumstances and biography to respond to our students better? Can I invite my students to bring their biographies into their intellectual pursuits? I hope reason becomes a vital endeavor by seeking the answers to these questions.

In Tomasita's story, there are many dimensions of exclusion. She is excluded from economic developments of the region because she grew up in a village. She is excluded socially, and finally schools closed their doors to her. Can schools be more open to communities around them? Do schools see those communities as problematic? Tomasita eagerly feels connected to what her sons are studying and reading, she wants to respond and converse with the knowledge they engage with at school. Are schools places that encourage those conversations?

Tomasita returned to words that had been painful: *ignorante*, *india*. In facing her circumstances, she took on those words and gave them new meanings. *Ignorante* had no effect on her as it did before. She joked around the word *india*, as laughing at her circumstances, and not distrusting her self-worth at all. This experience challenges me to think about setting up educational experiences that encourage students to break away from

words that trouble them, to question their own histories, and emerge from them. In Orteguian terms life as biography as a window into the different meanings of words at various points of our lives.

As an educator, I am challenged to ask what are the circumstances of students' biographies that inform their actions, words and attitudes in classrooms? 'Rationalist assumptions of education shape pedagogy in such a way that educators tend to see subject areas or study themes separated from biography. This is not the case for Tomasita. Her story shows the societal, political, and economical aspects of exclusion that occur beyond classrooms are woven into her educational efforts.

When I witnessed the study group of Tomasita, Vero and Alicia, it was truly a group effort. The ethos of the group is that *nadie se ahoga a la deriva* (no-one drowns adrift). Students stopped their study with no hesitation. It was never a lone effort. Whatever concept, idea or theme each of the women of the study group mastered she saw it as belonging to the group, and generously shared. As an educator I learn that leaving students behind is not an ethical teaching practice. I am challenged to create classrooms where understanding of concepts and subjects is always in a context of *solidaridad*. As an educator I am challenged to see students' stories as a more complicated picture of who my students are - Tomasita shared with me the multiple voices of her life as a woman, indigenous, student, mother, worker, friend, churchgoer. Tomasita invites me to keep my privilege in check.

CHAPTER SIX

Somos *Familia*: Unanimous Efforts

Vero's Story

In this interview, Vero explained to me what her study group *familia* meant to her. I use this conversation as the basis for interpreting the significance of her efforts in the community, and the friendship with Alicia and Tomasita. In this conversation, Vero shares several metaphors of *familia* and gives new windows into their lived experience of *convivencia* as an indispensable component of education. Through those metaphors, we can understand the ethos of being *familia*. The questions that I address are: How do those metaphors give a more complex picture of *compañerismo* in education? This chapter explores the instances of studying in *convivencia*.

Familia de Estudio

Vero blended very well with Tomasita and Alicia. She laughed a lot with Alicia and Tomasita. Tomasita and Alicia always saw Vero ahead of them in what they were studying. She was the only one who had completed her *secundaria* and continued studying in vocational school. Often times Tomasita sat next to Vero. Tomasita explained jokingly she did this because she wanted to “peek at Vero’s homework.” Vero enjoyed those comments. Eventually Vero made them laugh as well. One of those moments was during an English session. I asked them to introduce each other in English, and Vero’s answer was, “I kill chicken.” That day, I learned that she lived a few blocks uphill from the main Plaza. She owns a *pollería* [chicken shop], and part of her job includes purchasing chickens from a local provider, slaughtering and skinning them.

Although Vero finished her *secundaria* through a regular school, not Plaza Comunitaria, she is very close to Plaza Comunitaria. At the time of this interview she had become an *asesor* in Plaza Comunitaria, and met there regularly with Alicia and Tomasita.

Vero took her teenage daughter with her to the study group meetings in the Plaza Comunitaria building. Vero's daughter often sat next to her observing all of them study, quiet and observant, almost hiding behind her mom. Perhaps my presence had something to do with it. Vero's daughter eventually mingled with them more, and started offering help as they studied.

I had met Vero during my first visits. Eventually, I interviewed her at home. When I requested an interview, Vero had a similar reaction to Tomasita's. She seemed skeptical about what she could contribute. I told her that I wanted to learn more about what they had done as study group. Once she agreed, it was difficult to find a time that worked for her. We finally agreed to have the interview on Saturday night. Vero explained to me how to get to her house. Tomasita also gave me directions. Anticipating any confusion Tomasita suggested I take a *mototaxi* to Vero's house. "*Maestro* when you take the *motaxi*, tell them Vero's husband's nickname, they will know immediately, mention you are going to the *pollería*. And don't forget to go to the town's plaza where I will be working selling hamburgers. No es por nada pero están muy ricas." I could not wait to try those hamburgers. Once in the *mototaxi*, I followed Tomasita's directions. After the driver went around the block a few times, we finally stopped at her house. It was a two-story green house. Vero came out, moved the dogs away and opened the fence made from metal rods painted in white. Her family was curious about the interview so they stayed around to listen to the interview.

In the summer of 2015 I noticed Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero's excitement that they were so close to their goal: the high school diploma. That summer, when I had the chance interview Vero, I was interested in the dynamics of their study group. How did it start? What are some of their most memorable moments? How they manage life and study? How did they keep the study group afloat? Vero's answers opened my eyes to the ethics of their study group. Vero helped me take a closer look at how each member of the group was aware of the

needs of the others, how they recognized their individual talents and encourage each other, shared information that can benefit the group, listened to each other struggles and joys, supported the members of the group. Vero put it in very clear terms: “ The group, you can say we are *familia*, that is how we treat each other, *como una familia*. ” Such statement summarized the ethics of the study group. Through a vision of each other as a *familia* they generated an environment that protected the women who wanted to continue their program. Vero adds,” right now we are approaching our goal". She continued explaining:

Compartir...como tres de nosotras somos amas de casa.

Compartir nuestras experiencias de la casa y todo,
y el esfuerzo que hacemos.
Yo creo que eso más une.

Porque el esfuerzo que nosotras hacemos para estudiar,
es casi unánime,
así lo sentimos.

Y entre nosotras mismas nos apoyamos,
es un apoyo mutuo,
por eso sentimos,
que es como un tipo de familia,

que tenemos formado.

I translated Vero's words:

To share...because three of us are housewives,

To share our experiences, in the house and all experiences,
and the efforts we make.

I believe that unites us even more.

Because the effort we make to study,
is almost unanimous,
that is how we feel it.

All support emerges from us,
it is support that is mutual,
that is why we feel that,
it is a kind of a family,

that we have, that we have formed.

Vero summed up how they understood their *familia*. In this poem, that I titled *familia de estudio*, Vero expressed three aspects of their shared *vivencias*: shared experiences, shared study efforts, and shared support. There are also clear parallels along the poem that enhance her message. I noticed this by paying attention to the central words in every stanza: First stanza *share, efforts, unite*; second stanza *efforts, unanimous, feel*; third stanza *support, feel, family*. Vero expressed that their shared experiences started with shared experiences *de la casa*. This phrase signaled a space that is traditionally for women. By stating that their experiences are *de la casa* Vero reveals these shared experiences as women. She does not

stop there. She adds *y todo*. Vero does not confine shared experiences to *la casa* only. The experiences that resonate with each other go beyond the spaces of *la casa*.

Towards the end of the first stanza Vero brings in their shared study efforts. It introduces what comes in the next stanza. Their study efforts are almost unanimous. And they feel it is that way. Those efforts are clear. They met together several times a week after their *quehaceres* to attend class and discuss, figured out how to bring teachers connecting to friends, families and social networks, gave each other tips on how to ace tests, celebrated their failures and accomplishments. Vero said in the third stanza, “*Y entre nosotras mismas nos apoyamos.*” In this sentence Vero explained that the support they need to continue comes from each other; it emerges from them. “*Entre nosotras mismas*” conveys a sense of a self-sustaining group that generates support for everybody.

Those are the constitutive shared experiences of their *familia*. Finally, Vero talked about her group as a “*familia que tenemos formado.*” A reader of this poem pointed out that the use of present perfect here did not seem to make sense with the verb *tenemos*. The reader asked me, shouldn't she use *hemos formado* (have formed) instead of *tenemos formado*? The reader suggested that this was a grammatical error. Vero's use of *tenemos formado* instead of *hemos formado* did come across as a grammatical mistake. However, Vero's words made sense communicatively. I reflected on the meaning of this sentence in the context of the interview and my observations. Then, I realized that Vero's words communicated both, the sense of having a *familia* (they can hold onto it as something secure) as well as having formed a *familia* (developing this relationship over time). From a purist perspective on language this colloquial usage has been discouraged. I believe that is the reason the reader of this poem pointed it out. In the case of Vero I realized that her usage captured a complex phenomenon that defied the correct grammatical structures. I decided to render the translation as “that we have, that we have formed.” I did this with the intention of keeping Vero's

communicative intent as well as her words.

High School

After Tomasita and Alicia had finished their *secundaria* through Plaza Comunitaria they wanted to continue studying. Vero had completed her *secundaria* though one of the local schools and studied at a vocational school, but wanted to obtain a high school diploma. She was looking for an opportunity. She recalled that the mayor of Agua Clara at the time promoted the idea of establishing a high school in town so that local students wouldn't have to commute to neighboring villages. Those plans faded away and remained in Vero's memories as more unfulfilled promises. Then the mayor brought "*Preparatoria Abierta*" [Open High School] program to the village as way to cover for this failure. Vero remembers a very enthusiastic invitation that captivated her:

Pues cuando llega el coordinador de prepa abierta a hacer la invitación al municipio, yo acudo a la junta y pues la forma en que él explicaba y el entusiasmo que demostraba pues me llegó, igual a mí me entusiasmó mucho y como no habían edades, o sea un límite de edad, para estudiar, pues es en que me inscribí.

When the coordinator of Prepa Abierta came to town to invite the municipality, I attended the session. The way he explained it, and the enthusiasm that he demonstrated was very touching. His enthusiasm was contagious, and since there was no age limit to study, I enrolled. [July 2015]

The *Preparatoria Abierta* program started with approximately 40 students in town. Vero and Tomasita remember that students were mostly younger students who had dropped out of school. Vero did not know Tomasita and Alicia back then. She met them through *Preparatoria Abierta*. They became closer friends as classes progressed. Vero recalled those times as fun reliving their days as students. Later, little by little students dropped out over time. The group of women who stayed became closer to each other. They treated each other

as *familia*.

Studying English

They transformed every place and time into an opportunity to study in *convivencia*. Study time did not go without a regular dose of laughter. It allowed to take their mistakes lightly, as an opportunity to laugh at themselves. Review sessions were very intense. I could feel the tension as they reviewed unfamiliar concepts. In those moments, tensions would be relieved by one of their *ocurrencias* (witty and funny remarks).

Laughter and their *ocurrencias* continued during break time. They all contributed towards snacks. Even though they did not expect me to do so, I also made my contributions. We would walk to the convenience store around the corner to buy French baguettes, cheese spread, soda drinks. On our walk two blocks from the school where they held their sessions, they often talked about their experiences with different teachers, and subjects. They shared about what subjects were more difficult, and who were the teachers who had provided helpful explanations. I came to realize how perceptive they were about their teachers' pedagogical moves.

Eventually, they invited me to participate. Tomasita, Vero and Alicia had difficulties finding teachers who would go to the village; due to issues of pay and distance it was difficult to find teachers. They, however, had managed to find new teachers, often drawing from their own networks. On top of that, they had expressed that English as a Foreign Language had been the most difficult to exam to pass. Knowing that they needed to pass English before they could receive their high school diploma, I offered help.

I did not want to teach them to the test. At the same time, assuming a pragmatic stance they needed some quick tips to ace the test. I led several activities in which they had to speak completely in English, our target language. I had them introduce themselves and talk about themselves. After the activity, they said it was a challenge, but came out of that activity

satisfied to know how much English they managed to understand and speak. I also gave them some explanations using some of the practice tests they used to prepare.

We agreed to meet every night during my stay. Since they worked all day, we would meet at 8:00pm when all of them had finished their daily activities and work. It was perfect. That schedule would give me enough time to prepare the lesson, and reconnect with other people in the village during the day. When the time came, they were all ready to study. They had texted each other reminders that we would meet at Tomasita's place. They were ready to study. I experienced an environment where I was welcomed. It was festive. Laughter filled Tomasita's kitchen, the place we had selected as the study place. While I was posting some big pieces of bond paper to the refrigerator using some magnets, they kept chatting about how rusty their knowledge of English was at the time. I did not see nervousness. They were excited about learning English as a Foreign Language.

We had created a classroom that was unlike anything else I had experienced either as a student or as the instructor. A kitchen served as our setting. We used the big table at the center of kitchen to sit around. The fridge had been adapted to be the board with some big pieces of paper attached to it. Alicia brought some markers from her church. That is all we needed.

As I taught that class every night for the study group I observed how they enjoyed getting together, studying with a good sense of humor; creating new memorable moments, and helping each other to understand the ideas of the sessions. Sometimes, they talked about their efforts as something impossible to accomplish. They felt they were not meant to study. Fortunately, those feelings would not stay for long. As soon as they start studying they would forget them. They are very determined to study.

They showed respect for each other's progress without making anybody feel bad. It is not a competition. It is about supporting each other. One day, Tomasita told me that even

though she already passed the music exam, she did not want to tell the others because she did not want to come across as a show-off and make the others feel bad. She was being respectful of the pacing her *compañeras* take to study. They pushed each other. One of the nights when we studied English, Tomasita was having trouble in English class, and Vero stopped and helped her.

This group truly enacted a kind of classroom I had advocated for, a classroom where students felt comfortable to come for learning. Except I did nothing to make this happen. This group of women created this learning environment over years of friendship and studying together. I was welcomed into the group, and throughout my time there I was showered with kindness. An ethics of *familia* helped Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero endure.

The more time I spent teaching and *conviviendo* with the study group, the more I realized how comfortable they are with each other. This leads to have a safe environment for learning. Vero, Alicia and Tomasita never shame others because of mistakes, there is a true sense of community. They have lived many hardships together and listened to each other. That time together helps them through stressful moment. Later, as I walked with Alicia to her place, she told me that this is a "therapy time" for them. She said that getting together to study does not cause them any stress.

They told me they always tried to use what they learned. If they learned new words, new concepts, they often brought that up in their conversations with other people. For example, Alicia shared with me about how they would discuss *textos politicos* in the context of Agua Clara events. I have witnessed trust in the group. They also talk about each other highly. They always express sympathy for any trouble they have experienced, and admiration for their friends' accomplishments. This is a very compact group.

Vivid Images

Vero shared imagery that can serve an interpretative lens to understand the ethics of

studying together. It helped me make sense of what I observed over time. Vero's lenses helped me uncover their commitments. Vero explained two about two types of communal action. First, she talked about actions prompted by perceived need. The two ideas she offered were: “*Una se ahoga sola a la deriva*” and “*Me pongo en los zapatos de la otra persona.*” Second she described actions that encompassed joint efforts in pursuit of their goals. Those actions are: “*Nos echamos porras,*” “*Jalamos parejo.*”

In the summer of 2015, they decided that I was going to help them out in their preparation for the English exams. This is an instance when they performed *jalandando parejo*. *Jalar parejo* means they act together, get organized, and make things work for all of them. That summer, they made the decision as a group to get together during the evenings to study English. They acted based on that decision. Another way I can paraphrase Vero's words is that they do not bail on each other. The group decisions overwrite individualism. *Jalar parejo* means that when they all push or pull at the same time, the combined strength creates synergy. They tackle any challenge as a group better than attempting to solve them individually.

Jalar parejo does not mean they drop their responsibilities to attend to the group needs. This is not what I observed when I interacted with them. Vero, for instance, consistently talked about how she attended to her responsibilities as a mother, wife, friend, and worker. Alicia and Tomasita were also very committed to their endeavors and families. They also see how what they do in their group helps them be better in their families, work, and as citizens. Vero, Tomasita, and Alicia performed *jalandando parejo* in every turn of their educational efforts. Whether it was small actions such as splitting the bill of their snacks or passing on their study notes, or traveling to Mérida together to take a test together.

Vero also expressed that in their daily effort *echar porras* is key to their ethos. This aspect of their *convivencia* is very clear in moments when some of them get ahead in their

program. Instead they assumed the position of cheering for the other person. They encouraged their *compañeras* and did anything on their hands to help the other. Vero recalled moments when they had to take an exam, whenever anyone passed the exam, she would pass the study notes. In Veronica's words, "Here is my study material, use it, and go pass that test." Vero's explanation reminded me of the sessions I led in English. If somebody was going to answer, the rest would not say anything, but look at the person, and if they knew the answer, they would not say anything, just make expressions assenting or telling the person to think harder. In other words, when someone had to perform, they would stand around that person and offer some help, or cheer for the other person.

Veronica's words created a powerful image. She said: "All by yourself, you drown adrift." In Spanish she said, "*Una se ahoga sola a la deriva.*" It communicated the sense of urgency to rescue someone who is in trouble. It also serves as a signal for them when they are not acting in *convivencia*. They know that there is a problem if someone is having trouble and they forgot about her. If one of them is having problems with a topic or a concept, they stop and walk together through the concept. They make sure the other person understands before continuing. Sometimes, they keep discussing the ideas in their study sessions as they walk home or during their break. Tomasita, Vero and Alicia are very perceptive of each other's needs.

Finally, Vero explains, "*Me pongo en los zapatos.*" Through this words Vero expressed the deep sense of empathy. Vero, Tomasita and Alicia have many experiences in common. Those similarities built a sense of *compañerismo*. But that sense it is also built around their differences. It is through those differences that they grow a sense of empathy towards each other. They all know that Alicia is always busy with all her activities and they are *empáticas* of her schedule. They all know that Tomasita faces like as a single mother with two teenagers, and low income, and they all put themselves in Tomasita's shoes. Alicia

constantly reflected on how her students had faced tough circumstances, even harder than the ones she had faced.

Vero eloquently explained what it means to be committed to study.

La disponibilidad del tiempo.

Eso es lo que a mí se me ha complicado más.

pues soy esposa,
madre,
el trabajo que hace la ama de casa,
y todo.

El estudio tiene que ser por las noches.

Después de terminar con el trabajo del día,
y todo el cansancio,
aun así hay que estarle dando.

El tiempo para dedicarle a mis estudios,
es lo que me hace falta.

Yo casi siempre en las noches,
después de todo el trabajo del día,
es cuando yo agarro mis apuntes,
y me pongo a estudiar.

I rendered the translation as follows:

Time availability.

That is what is more complicated to me,

because I am wife,

mother,

the work a housewife does,

and all.

Study time has to be at night times.

After finishing the work of the day,

feeling all that tiredness,

even then we have to keep getting at it,

Time to devote to my study,

that is what I need.

Usually, I study at night,

after all work during the day,

it is then that I grab my notes,

and I get to study.

As I read Vero, I felt time slipping off my hands. Vero takes on her *quehaceres* moving clockwise. One activity after another, aware that the day is passing. Tackling laboriously one task at a time. Taking on different hats as a mother, wife, worker, friend, and student. If I imagine those activities, commitments, and tasks, I can start feeling the

commitment as she grabs her notes at the end of the day. This interview opened my eyes to the commitments Tomasita, Alicia, and Vero had demonstrated, and that I had witnessed over three summers. I headed out of Vero's house. I rode another mototaxi to the town's Plaza. On that Saturday evening I had some time to pause and reflect on Vero's words. It was an active evening since a lot people were back in town for the weekend. Light, music, street vendors were all over the Plaza. I headed to the town's Plaza to try the hamburgers Tomasita had told me about earlier.

Pedagogy with Vero

The summers that I visited Agua Clara, I came to know Vero as an inseparable *compañera* of Tomasita and Alicia. Her perspective helped me realize how they had developed a sense of familia over time. One of the most inspiring moments from getting to know Vero was the opportunity to hear about what sustained the group over time. They had made their study group *familia*. She did not mean this in romanticized way. It did not mean they abandoned their families to form a new one. It meant they had a set of principles, and practices that sustained them.

It was also very inspiring that, because they treated each other as *familia*, their study sessions blended conversations that could happen at a family gathering with their conversations about school, and conversations about school subjects. Oftentimes to study school subjects was in fact a conversation. References to contents they had studied blended with their daily conversations.

Vero depicted their study group ethos in several vivid images that I have shared above. Those images capture two broad actions, being attentive to urgent need, and working with a group mindset. Their study session could stop anytime to help someone who was lagging behind; there was no blaming on the person for making everybody stop. The effects of those actions were very tangible; 40 people started Preparatoria Abierta and only three of them-- Tomasita, Vero, and Alicia--had continued and in 2015 were very close to finishing.

It was also very refreshing to see a place where competition was completely out of the picture. Vero had talked about how at the beginning of Preparatoria Abierta she had the back-to-school feeling. However, as they continued they felt more comfortable to be themselves. As students dropped out of the program they brought more of their personal lives into their classroom. Even though this program gives grades and is organized around passing the tests, there was no slight indication of competition. On the contrary, they had sustained their group

on mutual respect, generosity, and support.

Studying for the test had some washback in their study group. Oftentimes they felt frustrated about the test, and focused on the study guides. However, their study did not end up there. While trying to figure out concepts, ideas, exercises, they did not hesitate to look around and look at their realities through those concepts. A vivid example was when I heard them talk about the mayor of the town by referring to Machiavelli.

Laughing mishaps off is also a key part of their study group. Galván (2014) encountered similar attitudes with a group of rural women in México, in Galván's study women called themselves *mujeres desjuiciadas*. Galván (2014, p. 605) translates this literally as "lacking sense, reason or sanity." However, this expression reveals something about their characters beyond the literal translation. She further explains that "This fusion of dedication and impulse, *una inquietud*, is what inspires women of these rural communities to act upon their community's problems." In my experiences in Plaza Comunitaria, Tomasita, Vero and Alicia laughed off their mishaps as they were making things happen.

This group effort once more made reflect on the concept of historical reason. Ortega y Gasset does not make the mass or the individual the center of his understanding of history, but an interaction of both in which everything starts from the radical realities of the individual. This perspective does not separate heroes from the masses. His notion of historical reason posits that our experiences are not lonely experiences isolated from the mass. We live those experiences with other people, our encounter with our circumstances. I see in Vero an enactment of Ortega's notion of historical reason. Vero explains the circumstances of her life, and the circumstances of studying on top of all her responsibilities. However, through her *creencias* and *vivencias* she builds along with her *compañeras* over time, a *familia* de estudio. In this process, the individual and the group are fused together, or in Ortega y Gasset's words "historical life is *convivencia* (2004).

Villenas (2005), drawing from literature that addresses the interactions of Latinos and education captures the importance of *convivencia*:

Latinas manage to ‘mother,’ to teach and learn, to know, and to inscribe their words in the world within/against the all too often dehumanizing relations in the larger society. The technologies that emerge -sobrevivencia, spirituality, and humor casero (humor of the space home) to name a few- spur innovation, improvisation, and cultural production, enabling dynamic communal pedagogies of personal and social transformation.(p. 275)

Vero illustrated this interaction between the personal and the social towards transformation. This transformation is possible when their *familia* ethos overwrote individualism, when they did not hesitate to act from their generosity, and when their ways of conceptualizing study took any remnant of competition out of the picture.

CHAPTER SEVEN

De-limitations

I have often confronted the question: How does this study connect to my work as a language educator? I have resorted to answering it in a way that feels artificial: “Those applications are not the primary goal of this study.” I reply with my acquired polite academic manners. After further reflection at the close of this study, I have been able to elaborate: “I intend to move readers more than give them prescriptions.” My elaboration to the answer has been tricky as well because still does not explain why I find the question problematic. Adding to that, I am not convinced that it is epistemologically possible, or even ethical, to abstract a certain *episteme* from this experience and then inject that into another educational setting with the intention of norming it. Particularly, considering what Ortega y Gasset eloquently expressed in *En torno a Galileo*: the substance of life is movement. If I attempt to capture life as I capture objects, that which I call life slips off my hands; stops being “spontaneous life” to become a “purified object” to put it in Ortega’s terms in *Meditaciones del Quijote*. I read that often-confronted question ethically: Why should I norm other classrooms based on what I learned in this classroom? However, given that I am the common denominator between those classrooms, I imagine a different way of posing it: Can I be transformed through this inquiry in such a way that this transformation reverberates in other classrooms where I participate, whether as teacher or student? If I face my conundrum through my re-interpretation of the question, in a broader sense, the task at hand is one of possibilities. Through the second question, I find myself more inclined to suggest what is next because possibilities suggest, outline, and prompt imagination. And there is something about prompting imagination that is more compelling than my first artificial answers.

In this final chapter I have two intentions that allude to the title of the chapter “de-limitations.” The prefix *de* is used to invert the meaning of a word. As examples of it I take

the words construct and deconstruct. By separating the prefix from the word “limitations” I can invert its meaning. In that sense, it would stop being about setting limits. This in turn, prompts me talk about possibility. I also read this title as one word: “delimitation.” In that case the prefix *de* brings another possible meaning, that of reducing, similar to demarcating or the not so happy word deforestation. Following the second sense of the prefix *de* in delimitation, this chapter refers to the exercise of making explicit my values, epistemology and my practices as they emerged in the making of this research project. By naming it, I can establish some boundaries to the issues I do not want to address, or I that want to approach differently.

Early in my research project I encountered two sources of inquiry that seemed to be in opposition to each other that is fieldwork and philosophical work. It would not be until later that I would start making connections between these two apparently opposed camps. One of those aspects of my research that became more explicit are the fields that are involved in my work. I want to echo the words of Hansen, Wozniak, & Diego (2014) explaining how their project fused fieldwork and philosophical reflection: “Anthropological and educational imagination in the project derives inductively from a kaleidoscope of actual human voices and acts” (pp. 161-162). In my research, one of those voices is also mine. I came to the realization that I also needed to look at myself in the process of inquiry. I proceed now to explain what has happened to me in the process, while the reader can imagine other possibilities. I will let the reader be, if desired, the common denominator between this text and other possible situations.

What I Learned as a Researcher: Nomenclatura

I learned through this research the process of naming. Thinking about this evokes in my mind that mythical time in Macondo when things had no names. That process of naming emerged when I asked the question: can I read the words of the women of Plaza Comunitaria

as poetry? At first, I had the sense I could, but I had no words to explain it. I then wondered what is the difference between the language of a poet who uses metaphorical language to express ideas, and the scholar who relies on a certain form of language to express the concepts, arguments, ideas? While I cannot solve that issue, I see how some of those processes at times overlap. It was by learning about the overlaps between the poetic imagination and research that would prove to be a fruitful space for making my ideas more explicit.

The awareness that the recorded words of women of Plaza Comunitaria could be studied through poetic lens became possible in the summer of 2016. I was reading the transcripts again. I perceived a certain beauty in the words of the women of Plaza Comunitaria. They evoked images, used metaphors, themes appeared repeatedly as if they were intentionally highlighting some issues. I could not explain what that meant. *Fue una experiencia inquietante*. I did not know how to react. Through multiple conversations, I found scholars who have experienced the same issues. Different names appeared, poetic inquiry (Pendergast, Lego & Shameshina, 2009), ethnopoetics (Hymes, 1994; Blommaert, 2006), the poetics of everyday conversation (Tannen, 2007). This is a process of articulation. Once this articulation was done, then it became possible to bring language from the poetry and literary analysis to speak to those experiences. I can now say that the patterns of repetition I observed are artistic because of their ability to condense a story and communicate effectively, conveying a sense of beauty and enhancing creativity.

I learned to look at the assumptions behind what I say and do. Taking those apart and putting them back together, disassembling and reassembling those ideas. Through this process, I learned to explain my decisions, and gained the courage to stand by them. I found ways to express my ideas and perspectives in intellectually persuasive terms. This process, in the nomenclature of streets, allowed me to chart certain geographies on my ideas, that in turn,

let me make more connections. Making connections between old and new parts of the text, recombining and rephrasing became a generative thinking process of articulation, which makes me think of the original meaning of articulation: a connecting point, a joint. This process also made me more conscious of the limitations of my experience and the incommensurability of reality.

I discovered the possibilities for the ethics of research beyond standard research ethical procedures. Plaza Comunitaria taught me how to elaborate a pedagogy starting from the people. I don't claim this as my novel idea. Education scholars have theorized culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 1995), funds of knowledge (Gonzalez, Moll, Tenery, & Rivera, 1995; Gonzalez, & Moll, 2002) decolonial education in indigenous contexts (Absolon, 2011; Tanaka, 2016), and literacies in spaces outside of school (Bernal, 2001; Majors, 2016), and how cultural resources can inform pedagogies (Espinoza-Herold, 2007). Those ideas frame the participation of researcher and educators in ways that are sensible with the communities where research takes place. In my case and research, an array of concepts would be fleshed out with the stories of Plaza Comunitaria: *familia, respeto, convivir, compañerismo, vivencia, jalar parejo, nadie se ahoga sola*. In my *vivencia* of the iterative process of research I found out that I can encounter an educational phenomenon and build my inquiry starting from that research encounter.

What I Learned about Being an Educator

As an educator, I am now more articulate in questioning my assumptions. I am now looking for ways to expand my pedagogy by bringing vital aspects into it. As an example I find the words of Granell (1960), a disciple of Ortega y Gasset, helpful. He said that Ortega y Gasset had three main pedagogical moves: *seducir, inquietar, asombrar*.

Inquietar, in Ortega y Gasset's pedagogy, according to Granell means the educators' main purpose is not teaching a subject matter *per se*. The educator shows the need of the

subject of study in the life of the student. The student then stops, ponders, and discovers. When students can make the connection between their life and what is studied learning becomes a vital experience. Educators work consist in generating this environment. In my case, I did not act as an educator in Plaza Comunitaria. When I arrived at Plaza Comunitaria, I found that Tomasita, Vero y Alicia had already found their “need” or in other words, they were already making connections between what they studied and their own lives. They were already *mentes inquietas*. But since the work of their mind was not separate from the work of their lives I will translate that expression as *lives full of curiosity*.

I learned to pay attention. I started looking more carefully into their words, observing their actions, listening to their stories and visions, as everything was happening. Being present meant to attend to the movement. It prepared me to gather materials to construct pedagogies. Those actions tie back to one of Gasset’s arguments that educators use anachronistic pedagogies, distant in time, distant from the people, and distant from us, educators. He finds disturbing that educators do not develop their own pedagogies, and that they end up using ideas far from them. I had heard that pedagogy can emerge, but I had not experienced how. The words and experiences of women of Plaza Comunitaria are still informing my thinking. The time I spent thinking though the data, I learned how generative the words of Plaza Comunitaria scholars were, in conversations, helping people reflect on themselves. As an educator, I learned to be more open perceptually to the strengths of students. I learned to stop and listen, before making conclusions.

Students of Spanish read these poems attentively in courses I taught with students of Arts and Humanities. Through those poems, they asked questions about the adult education programs, noticed the relational nature of learning in the context of Plaza Comunitaria in contrast to how they have experienced school. They translated words, and lines and complete stanzas to make better sense of their reading. It is in the contexts of those readings that one of

the students asked me about Vero's use of *tenemos formado una familia*. The discussion we had then prompted me to look for ways to explain this, and make sense of it. I can see the content of this dissertation interacting with my work as language educator.

Furthermore, those poems served as a window into experiences of Spanish speakers that can transform the foreign language classroom into a more human experience. They can take the foreignness out of Foreign Language pedagogies. I read those poems as lively texts that capture spontaneous life. In my own experiences during my analysis, reading "found poetry" has sparked good conversations about different speech communities in Spanish, and the effects of standardizing Spanish. Because women of Plaza Comunitaria do use Spanish creatively and within a context of generosity, I learned to challenge the notions that we need to learn a language for domination and outcompeting others. In sum, as learners of a foreign language, we can experience foreignness in a more human way.

What I Learned from Plaza Comunitaria

I want to start my closing section with a final story: The generosity of my hosts. The summer of 2013 I had attempted to find lodging in Agua Clara and failed. The annual celebration in honor of the Patron Saint gathers many people in Agua Clara. People return to their hometown for these celebrations. Alicia and I asked around town, we could not find available rooms. Alicia and Roberto did not hesitate to invite to stay at their house. Later, I learned that Roberto asked his brother (a construction worker) to put cement on the next-door room. Roberto moved his sewing machine to free up space in the living room, where I stayed. At the time it was the most finished room in their house. Multiple times, I offered to contribute with the costs of accommodations and for the times they provided meals. They refused to accept it. They never accepted any money, and reluctantly accepted the groceries I bought for them.

From the beginning, I was the person on the receiving end of help. However, I was

the person doing research, and I could have ignored this moment as a tangential event to what I was interested in learning. Experiences like this prompted me to see myself and reflect on what I had to learn from those experiences. I considered a crucial move since often times adult education programs operate within a development logic that ignores the human relationship dimensions (Bartlett, 2007). I was also glad to find that there were similar research experiences to mine. In a study of rural literacies of resistance Meyers (2011, p. 859) explains that a Reflexive Critical Ethnography is “an ethnographic field study that requires the researcher to constantly (re)consider her own assumptions and actions.” This considering and reconsidering became key in the process of thinking about research, and the stories that I had told many times started to create new meanings.

I want to end up with more questions. I am particularly interested in learning about what it means for indigenous students to take on learning in their own terms. If I think of Tomasita who is interested in many subjects, what does it mean for her to engage with Physics and Mathematics and English in her own terms? What does it mean to think about them as scientists or scholars in their own terms? To use some of Biesta’s (2012) terminology, instead of transferring academic language onto marginalized students for empowerment, what would academic language look like if each student studied in their own terms (emancipation)? What are the research possibilities of daily life talk and conversation for comprehending the relationship between indigenous students and knowledge? For the purposes of this study, I focused on the various recollections of *vivencias* women expressed and that I also lived in Agua Clara. I believe this is a space for more research in which researchers can look at themselves and bring what they learn to their own communities, not as a curious object of study, but as seeds for transforming our own places.

I came to appreciate people of *La Plaza* for their unwavering commitment to learning. Women used different spaces to engage communally and pursue their educational goals.

Women in Plaza Comunitaria were very different from each other in their educational experiences, age, marital status, and religious affiliations. Despite what made them different, they organized themselves and brought their ethics to Plaza Comunitaria and Preparatoria Abierta. They continually faced new challenges hindering their educational goals. They took on those challenges as a *faena* through their *quehaceres*. During my last visit in the summer of 2015, I learned the women of the study group were excited to being so close to finishing high school. I later learned that Vero, Tomasita and Alicia had obtained their high school diploma. That made me think of one of the last conversations when they expressed wanting to obtain a *Licenciatura* [Bachelor's degree].

My reflections of the Alicia, Tomasita, and Vero's *vivencias* enlighten my understanding of *convivencia* as pedagogy. In a pedagogy of *convivencia* there is a strong desire to learn together nourished by their generosity. Many times, women asserted: "*maestro, en lo que pueda ayudarle*" [teacher, I am happy to do anything to help out]. This assertion holds true for their peers as well. Thanks to my friends in Plaza Comunitaria of Agua Clara, I came to encounter adult education as a decolonial undertaking, and how attention to ethics and life dimensions can help me decolonize my own assumptions and practices. I am deeply indebted to them for their generosity, without them this project would not have taken off.

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